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ABSTRACT

This document is the final report on the experiences of mature students who had entered higher education through the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), a one-year course designed to provide an alternative route into higher education for adults and which utilizes a supportive environment plus an incremental, modular approach and small-group learning situations. Sections of the report, which includes 12 tables and 2 figures, provide an overview of the program and its methodology; present students' own accounts of their experiences; note students' progress; personal factors affecting students in higher education; academic experiences; goals and guidance in higher education; and the SWAP program as preparation for higher education. For this report, 53 of 100 students whose SWAP experiences were discussed in an earlier study were followed between 1994 and 1997; the majority were between 25 and 50 and had heavy financial and family responsibilities. Just over one-third experienced some difficulties. The report concludes that if all students are to maximize their educational potential, institutions will have to increase support for this growing diversity of entering students. Appendices include research procedures, response rates, summaries of cohort and student histories, and charts summarizing various financial and self-evaluation data. (BF)

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Scottish Access Students in Higher Education

Janet Powney
Stuart Hall

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Scottish Access Students in Higher Education

Janet Powney
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SCRE
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SWAP students in higher education

The final report of a study which followed the experiences in higher education of mature students who entered via the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) is published by the Scottish Council for Research in Education today. Taking into account the range and extent of problems experienced – financial, personal and academic – the picture that emerged was of students who were determined to persevere despite considerable difficulty.

SWAP was designed to provide an alternative route into higher education for adults. SWAP courses normally involve a series of modules followed over one year of full-time study. Overall, the SWAP approach aims to boost the confidence of participants through providing a supportive environment with an incremental approach to learning and the use of small group learning situations. In contrast, the researchers comment that higher education is not resourced, or at least organised, to provide the continuing individual support achieved through access courses. Students need to have confidence in themselves and at least minimum competence to be able to succeed in higher education but the very methods by which these are obtained through SWAP are not available in higher education.

Academic progress

The students taking part in the research were on science or humanities courses. The aim had been to follow students remaining from an original group of 100 who were the basis of an earlier study. Of these 75 students, 22 could not be contacted, leaving 53 whose progress was followed between 1994 and 1997. The majority of these 53 students did well. Of the 48 whose educational results are known, 40 obtained a higher education qualification, while 5 dropped out of higher education due to academic problems, ill health, or preference for a job and 3 were still undergraduates as the research finished. Of those who achieved a higher education qualification, 23 were awarded an Honours Degree, 14 an Ordinary Degree, and 3 some other qualification. Around half went on to further study, or planned to do so.

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Problems faced

The majority of students were between 25 and 50 and had heavy financial and family responsibilities. Six out of ten students experienced financial problems in one or more of the academic years concerned. All had spent a year on bursary support before entering higher education, and many faced difficulties arising from having to cope on limited means for a prolonged period. Around four in ten students had had term-time jobs at some point during their course. Women were more likely to work than men. The vast majority of all students had taken jobs in order to help finance their studies. However, most of those who had had paid employment still found themselves in financial difficulties.

Six out of ten students had had problems arising from personal circumstances (excluding finance) during their years of study. Ill health, whether their own or of close family, was a relatively frequent problem. Many simply found their everyday lives were already so full and demanding that this impinged on study. Such problems were more likely to be experienced by women. Just over half the students reported problems relating to the academic content of their courses at some stage, while just over one third, and more women than men, experienced difficulties as a result of some aspect of the operation of their course or institution. For example, for some students, library opening hours conflicted with child-care arrangements.

SWAP as preparation for higher education

Students were generally very positive about their SWAP experiences and how the scheme had prepared them for higher education; many students specified no drawbacks at all. Their commendations – including building confidence, having supportive tutors/ lecturers and developing study skills – underline the practical thrust of the main aims of SWAP courses. Students identified also less formal outcomes of SWAP. Sharing the experience of access with other mature students and building up a support network of fellow students were seen as an aid to tackling the potential isolation that many mature students face in higher education. Most commonly students criticised SWAP for its lack of examination-based assessment. However, such criticism was generally couched as identifying areas for improving an otherwise good course.

Implications for higher education institutions

Most students said that the establishment at which they studied did not acknowledge in any way that they had been access students. Their experiences suggest that support for such students continues to be a challenge for higher

continues

education institutions. Higher education is not resourced, or at least organised, to provide the continuing individual support achieved through SWAP. SWAP students, like many mature students, experience the conflicting demands of home and study at a time when they are trying to accommodate a new vision of themselves. However, unlike other mature students, SWAP students can draw on an already established support network of fellow SWAP students. While such support can combine with the confidence-building approaches and teaching methods of SWAP courses, they stand in contrast to the range of teaching methods which mature students encounter in higher education.

Notes for editors

1. The full report *Scottish Access Students in Higher Education* (authors Janet Powney and Stuart Hall) is published by SCRE, price £10.00 (Research Report No 84). It includes case studies and the full details of a substantial number of SWAP students as they progressed into and through higher education, giving an insight into the experiences and successes of some mature entrants in contemporary institutions of higher education. An executive summary is on the SCRE website at http://www.scre.ac.uk/summary/

2. The research was funded by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) and carried out by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE). It builds on earlier SCRE work – funded by the Leverhulme Trust – which looked at the experiences of these same students on access courses and in the early stages of higher education. Fieldwork began in summer 1994. Students were also interviewed in the 1994–95 and 1995–96 academic years.

3. The Scottish Council for Research in Education is an independent national body, founded in 1928 to support policy-making and good practice in education through the conduct and communication of research.

   For further details of SCRE's activities visit the SCRE Website at http://www.scre.ac.uk/ or contact SCRE Information Services.

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Contents

		Page
Acknowledgements		v
Executive Summary		vi
1	**Introduction**	1
	Summary	1
	Introduction	1
	The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP)	2
	Overview of the research	4
	Methodology	5
	Strengths and weaknesses of longitudinal research	5
	Scope and structure of report	7
2	**From the graduates' perspectives**	8
	Introduction	8
	Reflections on higher education	19
	Summary	20
3	**Overview of students' progress**	21
	Summary	21
	Introduction	22
	SWAP history	22
	Commencing higher education	22
	Higher education outcomes	24
	Beyond higher education	26
4	**Personal factors affecting students in higher education**	28
	Summary	28
	Introduction	29
	Extent of impact on academic studies	34
5	**Academic experiences**	35
	Summary	35
	Introduction	35
	Students' own views regarding their studies	36
	Nature of academic problems experienced	37
	Students' view regarding assessment	38
	Students' experiences of assessed work	42
	Outcome of assessment	50

6 Goals and guidance in higher education 53
Summary 53
Introduction 53
Advice 54
Changes of course 54
Ordinary vs Honours Degrees 55
Subject changes 55
Career plans 56

7 SWAP as preparation for higher education 58
Summary 58
Introduction 58
Are higher education institutions aware of SWAP students? 59
Students' retrospective reflections on SWAP 60
General issues emerging from the SWAP study 63
Conclusions 65

References 65

Appendices
1 Research procedures 66
2 Response rates 70
3 Summary of cohort and student histories 71
4 Students who failed or missed examinations 85
5 Charts 91

Charts
1 Interviews regarding academic experience 91
2 Financial problems 92
3 Students' evaluations of their studying in previous years 93
4 Academic problems experienced 94

Tables
1.1 Interview schedule for SWAP students in higher education 5
3.1 Composition of cohorts on commencing Access 22
3.2 Composition of cohorts commencing higher education 23
3.3 Qualifications obtained 24
3.4 Graduate outcomes 26
4.1 Family circumstances 30
4.2 Problems relating to personal circumstances (at any time) 30
5.1 How students fared with their studies (on the basis of own assessments) 36
5.2 Academic problems 37
5.3 Attitudes to course grades based on examinations/course work 39
5.4 Balance of assessment types preferred 41
6.1 Students' career plans and revisions 56

Figures
5.1 Students' perceptions of assessment based on course work 40
Students' perceptions of end of term examinations 40
7.1 Perceived Advantages/Strengths of SWAP 61
Perceived Disadvantages/Weaknesses of SWAP 61

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report represents the culmination of a longitudinal study concerning the experiences in higher education of a cohort of mature students who undertook the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), a one year course designed to provide an alternative route into higher education for adults. The research funded by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), has been carried out by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) and builds on earlier SCRE work – funded by the Leverhulme trust – which looked at the experiences of these same students on Access courses and in the early stages of higher education (Munn *et al* 1994).

SWAP courses normally involve one year of full time study. Courses are usually modular with 20 modules comprising a course. In this respect Access courses vary from traditional routes into higher education via Highers and/or A-levels. With each module being assessed separately, the process is one of continuous assessment rather than the more traditional end-of-term, or end-of-year, examination.

Taken overall, the SWAP approach is intended to boost the confidence of participants through provision of a supportive environment with an incremental approach to learning and the use of small group learning situations.

Aims of the longitudinal study

Although previous research had highlighted the effectiveness of Access courses (Munn *et al*, 1994), little was known about Access students' subsequent educational careers. The primary aim of the study was to examine some of the key factors which affected former SWAP students as they progressed through the Scottish higher education system. The following areas of interest were identified:

- progress in higher education
- problems and their resolution
- career plans
- changing roles and relationships.

Findings allow the efficacy of SWAP as preparation for higher education to be considered in the light of students' subsequent experiences and retrospective assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme. Aspects of SWAP students' experiences in higher education are likely to be typical of mature students as a whole and the study is therefore also likely to be of broad relevance.

Methods of enquiry

Students taking part in the research were engaged on science or humanities courses and were widely dispersed across Scotland. Thus the most convenient method of interview was by telephone. A loosely structured interview schedule was used covering areas such as progress, plans for the future, personal circumstances, course work and its assessment, and any academic problems encountered during higher education. Fieldwork began with interviews conducted in the summer of 1994 to provide an update on students' progress and experiences in the course of the previous academic year. Subsequent rounds of interviews were conducted concerning the 1994–95 and 1995–96 academic years.

Student numbers

At the outset of this SOEID funded phase of the research, the target number for interview concerning academic experience was 75, representing exactly three quarters of the original group of one hundred SWAP students who took part in the earlier Leverhulme funded study. The remaining 25 students either did not go on to higher education following SWAP [9], had lost touch or declined further involvement with the research during phase 1 [11], or had dropped out of higher education during phase 1 [5].

Of the 75 students whom the researchers sought to contact at the outset of phase 2:

- 22 could not be contacted at all
- 53 were in touch with the research at some point.

Loss of contact

The loss of students from the research sample was proportionately greater among science students. This disproportionate drop in contact largely dates from the period between the two research phases. Twelve of the 22 students lost between phases 1 and 2 were science students. This figure represents 40% of the 30 science students who were in higher education and in touch with the research at the close of phase 1. On the other hand, only 23% of the relevant humanities students were lost between the two phases of the research. The explanation for this most probably lies in the research programme. First contact with all students in the course of phase 2 of the research was in summer 1994. Science students had not been interviewed for two years at this point, while humanities students had been approached the year before, and so it is perhaps not surprising that loss of contact between the two phases was proportionately greater in respect of science students.

Overview of students' progress

The majority of the students with whom the research maintained contact over the research period experienced positive outcomes in respect of higher education.

Of the 48 students for whom we have known educational outcomes:

- 40 obtained a higher education qualification
- 5 dropped out of higher education due to academic problems, ill health, or preference for a job
- 3 remained undergraduates on completion of the research.

Of the 40 students who remained in contact with the research and obtained a higher education qualification:

- 23 obtained an Honours Degree
- 14 obtained an Ordinary Degree
- 3 obtained some other qualification
- Around half went on to further study, or planned to do so.

Personal factors affecting students' higher education

The majority of students were between 25 and 50 and had heavy financial and family responsibilities which often detracted from their studies.

Financial circumstances and employment

Six out of ten students had experienced problems concerning finance in the course of one or more of the academic years concerned. These problems could be severe and often posed a considerable challenge to the motivation of the students concerned. All the students had spent a year on bursary support prior to commencing higher education, and many faced difficulties arising from having to cope on limited means for a prolonged period.

> *I don't believe that you should have to pay for your education, but I'll need to take out a loan.* 4th year engineering student

Around four in ten students had undertaken term time work outwith their course of study at some point during their academic years. Women were more likely to work than men. The vast majority of all students had undertaken work in order to help finance their studies. However, most of those who had undertaken paid employment still found themselves in financial difficulties.

Problems arising from personal circumstances

Six out of ten students had experienced problems arising from some aspect of their personal circumstances (excluding finance) in the course of one, or more, of the academic years focused on in interview. Ill health was a relatively frequent problem, whether through illness on the part of the students themselves or of close family. Many simply found their everyday lives were already so full and demanding that they were likely to impinge on their studies. Such problems were more likely to be experienced by women.

> *Family circumstances meant I couldn't spent as much time as I would have liked on my dissertation.* 4th year science student

In terms of the extent to which personal problems led to academic difficulties, the following picture emerges

- Just over half of all students had experienced academic difficulties stemming from some aspect of their personal circumstances in the course of at least one of the academic years concerning which they were interviewed.
- Women were about twice as likely as men to experience academic problems as a result of the impact of personal circumstances.

Taking into account the range and extent of problems experienced and the severity of demands posed by personal and financial circumstances and family commitments, the predominant picture is of students who were determined to persevere despite considerable difficulty.

■ Academic experiences

Students experienced good and bad years of study. Just over half of the students reported problems intrinsic to the academic content of their courses at some stage, while just over one third, and more women than men, experienced difficulties as a result of some aspect of the operation of their course or institution. For example, for some students, library opening hours conflicted with child care arrangements.

In relation to assessment, humanities students were much more likely to favour courses based on continuous assessment than science students who were evenly split between favouring courses based on continuous assessment and those predominantly using end of session/year examinations.

Continuous assessment is fairer because some people have exam nerves.
3rd year Arts student

Science students were more likely to organise and take part in study groups than were humanities students. Students were likely to receive help from tutors in preparing for exams (two thirds of students) and essays (about half). The remainder would have appreciated help had it been offered.

In some cases students were required to submit other work, such as lab reports, projects and dissertations for assessment. All but one of the science students and six in ten of the humanities students had to submit such work and almost all of them said that they received help or an offer of help from lecturers or tutors in preparing it.

■ Students' goals and career plans

Most of the SWAP students sought advice from their tutor at some point and mainly during the early stages of their courses when topic choices within their course were more open.

Most students started out with some form of career plan. Career plans tended to be modified for positive reasons. However, in a few instances, changed

career plans were the result of poor academic performance or the difficulty of reconciling personal circumstances with the demands of the related higher education course.

Nine students made a clear change of direction in terms of their chosen subjects. Such changes were generally made for positive reasons, for example reflecting a developing interest in particular topics, or changed career plans. Only three students changed from their original courses.

■ SWAP as preparation for higher education

Students were generally very positive about their SWAP experiences and how the scheme had prepared them for higher education; many students specified no drawbacks at all. Their commendations – including building confidence, having supportive tutors/lecturers and developing study skills – underline the practical efficacy of the main aims of SWAP courses.

Students identified other less formal, though perhaps just as important, outcomes of SWAP. Sharing the experience of access with other mature students and building up a support network of fellow students were seen as beneficial in tackling the potential isolation that many mature students face in higher education.

> *'I wouldn't have got into higher education otherwise, I wouldn't have done 'O' grades. SWAP gave a broad basis for study. I was well prepared for the courses that I went on to do. Teachers were first class. Teachers in higher education were not as good as they were. All students were mature – bonded as a group and helped each other out. Access was less isolating than going into a school. We bonded better than in subsequent higher education. It was a worthwhile slog'*

Most commonly students criticised SWAP for its lack of examination based assessment. However, such criticism was generally couched as identifying areas for improving an otherwise good course.

■ Implications for higher education institutions

Most students said that the Higher Education establishment at which they studied did not acknowledge in any way that they had been Access students. The experiences of many of the students involved in this research would support conclusions reached by HEFCE:

> The extent to which sufficient and relevant support is provided by institutions for a broader student population needs to be considered. ..... a higher education institution will require appropriate student support services, both academic and pastoral, to cover the range of needs. Staff development programmes may be necessary to help staff accommodate the needs of different types of students. Changes to the curriculum and assessment may also be appropriate.
>
> (HEFCE 1997; p30)

The documented experiences of the SWAP students involved in this research suggests that such support continues to be a challenge for the higher education institutions they attended.

SWAP students, like many mature students, experience the conflicting demands of home and study at a time when they are trying to accommodate a new vision of themselves. However, unlike other mature students SWAP students can draw on an already established support network of fellow SWAP students. While such support can combine with the confidence building approaches and teaching methods of SWAP courses, they stand in contrast to the wide range of teaching methods adopted in higher education which mature students encounter. Higher education is not resourced, or at least organised, to provide the continuing individual support achieved through SWAP. Students need to have confidence in themselves and at least minimum competence to be able to succeed in higher education; but the very methods by which these are obtained through SWAP are not available in higher education. There is a mis-match of culture.

The lesson is clear. If all students are to maximise their educational potential, then institutions of higher education have to increase their awareness of, and support for, the growing diversity of students who enter higher education.

The full report of this study includes case studies and the full details of a substantial number of SWAP students as they progressed into and through higher education. Such information gives a great insight into the experiences and successes of some mature entrants into contemporary institutions of Higher Education.

1 Introduction

Summary

This report provides a detailed breakdown of educational progress and experiences of students who entered Higher Education through the Scottish Wider Access Programme. It comprises the second, and final, phase of a longitudinal exercise tracking mature students from their Access Programme courses through higher education. The primary aim was to examine some of the key factors which affected these former SWAP students as they progressed through the Scottish higher education system. Students' own retrospective assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme were also investigated. Findings allow the efficacy of SWAP as preparation for higher education to be considered in the light of students' subsequent experiences.

Despite losing participants from the sample – a problem associated with longitudinal models of research – this study is able to reflect the experiences of nearly 50 students progressing through on higher education after their Access course.

Although the research is exclusively based on students who entered higher education via SWAP, aspects of their experiences in higher education may well be typical of mature students as a whole and the study is therefore of wider relevance.

Introduction

This report represents the culmination of a longitudinal study concerning a cohort of mature students who undertook the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), a one year course designed to provide an alternative route into higher education for adults. The research funded by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), has been carried out by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE), and builds on earlier SCRE work – funded by the Leverhulme trust – which looked at the experiences of these same students on Access courses and in the early stages of higher education.

The primary aim of this study was to examine some of the key factors which affected these former SWAP students as they progressed through the Scottish higher education system. In particular, the following areas of interest were identified:

- progress in higher education
- problems and their resolution
- career plans
- changing roles and relationships.

Findings allow the efficacy of SWAP as preparation for higher education to be considered in the light of students' subsequent experiences and taking account of students' own retrospective assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme.

Although the research is exclusively based on students who entered higher education via SWAP, aspects of their experiences in higher education may well be typical of mature students as a whole and the study is therefore likely to be of some wider relevance.

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP)

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) was launched by the Secretary of State for Scotland in April 1988 with initial funding from the Scottish Office Education Department (now the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department) and the Training Agency. The programme is designed to provide an alternative route into Higher Education for adults (defined as those aged 21 and over).

The aims of SWAP are threefold:

- to improve the rate of participation in higher education by older students and those lacking the traditional qualifications
- to target traditionally under-represented groups in higher education (eg those from semi- and unskilled occupations, women, unemployed, single parents, ethnic minorities)
- to encourage collaboration between institutions of further and higher education so that effective progression from further to higher education would be easier.

For those students who successfully complete the SWAP course a place in a higher education institution is guaranteed.

Bursary support is available, with full time student bursaries originally funded by local education authorities. As of April 1996, however, bursaries are paid to students directly by the further education colleges they attend, with monies for such payments supplied by the SOEID.

History of Access courses and development of SWAP

Institutions of higher education have the option of offering places to students who do not have the normal minimum standard entry qualifications in terms of Highers and/or A-levels if it is felt that they are likely to be successful and to benefit from higher education. Prior to the 1992 Higher Education Act this practice was more frequent among polytechnics than universities. A scheme was developed across the UK whereby students could claim credit for relevant experience when seeking university entrance, and also if transferring once in higher education. In some instances students with substantial relevant experience or qualifications could even gain entrance with advanced standing to higher education and not have to complete the full standard programme. Access

programmes developed as part of this flexible system of entry into, and routes through, higher education.

Access courses existed in Scotland prior to SWAP. Some were developed by universities and other institutions of higher or further education, using their continuing education departments or specific faculties to enable adults without formal entry qualifications to undertake a course of study which, if successfully completed, would give students the right to enter a degree course at the associated university. Others emerged from an initiative by Strathclyde Regional Council, then the largest of Scotland's local education authorities, which, as part of its social and economic regeneration strategy, developed Access courses in three of its further education colleges.

The SWAP scheme was innovative and radical in that it drew together and built upon these existing schemes to involve all higher education institutions, further education colleges, and local educational authorities in Scotland, thus producing a systematic national approach to encouraging adult access to higher education. (This is in contrast to England, where a wide variety of schemes continue to exist.) The SWAP scheme has developed through three geographically based consortia involving higher education institutions, further education colleges, and local education authorities, covering the following areas: North of Scotland, West of Scotland, and South-East Scotland (the latter being formed in 1990 following amalgamation of the previous East Scotland and Mid-Scotland consortia).

The SWAP scheme had an initial emphasis on access to vocationally relevant higher education; courses were offered in science and technology subjects only, and the need for stronger partnerships between education and industry was emphasised. The range of subjects and courses has since diversified to cover arts, social sciences and humanities. There are also SWAP courses aimed at getting adults into higher education courses for specific professions, such as teaching and nursing. Moreover, SWAP now offers pre-access programmes and 'Preparation for Access' courses.

Routes into higher education

As a result of the developments outlined above, students who wish to pursue higher education but who do not have the normal minimum standard entry qualifications now have several options:

- study and obtain the necessary Higher Grade or A-level qualifications
- apply directly to the higher education institutions for entry without further qualifications
- undertake a course from SWAP and gain an entitlement to university entrance
- undertake a pre-access course, transfer to SWAP and gain an entitlement to university entrance (or apply directly to university following pre-access).

Nature of SWAP courses

SWAP courses normally involve one year of full time study, although a few part-time courses have emerged. Courses are usually modular, with each module representing a free-standing unit of work taking 40 hours, and approximately 20 such modules comprising a course. In this respect Access courses vary from traditional routes into higher education via Highers and/or A-levels, although provision of learning through SCOTVEC modules is increasing both in school and in further education.

In most cases SWAP also, and more fundamentally, departs from traditional routes in terms of the method of assessment employed. An important feature of SWAP is the deliberate practice of assessing students' attainments in terms of the learning outcomes specified for each module. Students are judged either to have achieved the learning outcomes or not, and are not graded in relation to each other as in norm-referenced systems. Also, each module is assessed separately, thus the process is one of continuous assessment rather than the more traditional end of term or end of year examination. Indeed, the mode of assessment seldom involves formal examinations, focusing instead on short answers, essays, and investigations.

Taken overall, the SWAP approach is intended to boost the confidence of participants through provision of a supportive environment with an incremental approach to learning and the use of small group learning situations. In this way it is expected that students' confidence in their own learning abilities will increase, and that this will help them to cope with potentially more uncongenial learning environments in higher education.

■ Overview of the research

This research focuses on a cohort of 48 students who undertook SWAP science courses, and a cohort of 52 students who undertook SWAP arts, social science, or humanities courses (subsequently referred to as humanities students). The scientists completed SWAP in the summer of 1991, while those studying humanities started SWAP a year later, completing the Access course in summer 1992.

The initial phase of the research tracked these students through the SWAP programme and the early stages of higher education. Interviews were conducted on three occasions: while on Access, shortly after completing Access, and one year later. This last interview took place in the summer of 1992 for students who had undertaken science-based SWAP courses, and – because the two groups started SWAP a year apart – one year later in the case of those who had studied humanities.

The SOEID funded phase, which is reported here, largely concerns the later stages of higher education. Fieldwork began with interviews conducted in the summer of 1994 to provide an update on students' progress and experiences in the course of the previous academic year. Subsequent rounds of interviews were

conducted concerning the 1994–95 and 1995–96 academic years. This meant that, in most cases, the interview programme concerned the following academic stages:

Table 1.1 Interview schedule for SWAP students in higher education

Phase 2	Swap Scientists	Swap Humanities
Interview 1	3rd year	2nd year
Interview 2	4th year	3rd year
Interview 3	Post-graduate studies	4th year

However, deviations from the above pattern could, and did, occur in the case of students who had delayed entry to higher education, taken time out from their studies, repeated a year of study, moved on to post graduate vocational training following graduation in third year, or changed from science based to humanities based courses or *vice versa*. (See Appendix 5 Chart 1 for details of interviews related to academic experience).

Methodology

As one of the criteria for selection of courses from which to draw the sample was that each of the four geographical areas corresponding to the consortia originally formed by the various authorities involved in SWAP (see above) should be represented, students were widely dispersed across Scotland and the most convenient method of interview was by telephone. This approach had proved satisfactory and reliable in earlier stages of the research, and was therefore retained for the SOEID funded phase. A loosely structured schedule was used, (available on request from SCRE) which covered areas such as progress, plans for the future, personal circumstances, course work and its assessment, and any academic problems encountered during higher education.

Forty-nine students from the original SWAP study remained in higher education or were accessible for interview for this study – 16 scientists and 33 from humanities. There were twice as many women as men with the vast majority taking humanities. Further details of the research procedures are in Appendix 1 but issues have emerged from this experience of longitudinal research.

Strengths and weaknesses of longitudinal research

Longitudinal research is an extremely valuable tool in that it allows for outcomes to be assessed over an extended period: many research studies into efficacy and outcomes do not allow for a sufficient follow up period to provide an adequate assessment. Had the present research been halted on completion of phase 1, former SWAP students would not have been researched beyond completion of their first year in higher education. This second phase of the research allowed for a longer follow up period, with almost all of the students having completed their

studies, and so provides the basis for a firmer assessment of the efficacy of SWAP as preparation for higher education and gives the opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme in the light of the totality of students' higher education experience.

As with many longitudinal studies, this research suffered loss of research subjects over time. However, this particular study has never been intended as a primarily statistical investigation. Rather the research approach has been designed to elicit views on qualitative issues via in-depth research with a small sample, with the strength of the study lying not in wide coverage but in the detailed information obtained on various issues from the students' own perspectives. So, while the loss of students from the sample is regrettable and has undoubtedly hampered the ability to draw conclusions on the success rate of the cohort groups in terms of educational outcome, this has not compromised the basic aims of the research.

Other difficulties arose from the practicalities of organising and deploying research staff in respect of work which is episodic over a prolonged period. Phase 2 entailed the annual involvement of a researcher for few weeks on a part time basis, with continuity of involvement maintained only between the penultimate and final rounds of interviews. Such situations often arise, given the contractual nature of research work. However, lack of continuity has implications in respect of efficiency in that the incoming researcher must devote more time and effort to picking up the threads of the previous year's work. Related to this is the omnipresent possibility that potential lessons are not learned and passed on to the next stage. For example, an improvement to the question concerning personal circumstances and their impact on studies was desirable in order to ensure that this issue was fully covered, the original question having been confined to the impact of any changes in personal circumstances occurring since the previous interview. This improvement was made only at the final stage when the interviewer, having noted the difficulty at the penultimate stage, was able to introduce a more appropriate form of wording. (However, issues relating to personal circumstances did in fact emerge strongly at all three stages.)

Even with continuity, the episodic nature of the work can lead to similar problems. For example, the decision to exclude detailed investigation of other assessed work along with examinations and essays at the final round appeared sensible as all had been covered in depth in the course of the two previous rounds. It was later realised that this had the effect of excluding consideration of the study methods employed and help received in relation to the dissertations completed by arts students, most of whom were in their honours year in the academic year in question. However, a question on experience of academic problems was retained, providing the opportunity for any difficulties experienced in relation to the submission of dissertations to be discussed.

■ Scope and structure of report

The research carried out in the course of phase 1, which tracked these students through the SWAP programme and the first year of higher education, has been fully analysed. Findings are documented in the report by Munn *et al.* (1994) which also provides detailed background information regarding the origins of the research.

Broadly speaking Munn *et al* found that SWAP students were very positive about their Access programme especially in relation to the boost in confidence and self-esteem associated with the modular structure of Access courses and the methods of assessment used. Three areas identified by the authors for future development of access courses were curriculum, assessment and student welfare but at that time there was no evidence about how these students would cope with higher education. That is the concern of this report which is organised as follows:

- *Chapter 2: Students' Own Perspectives* Five profiles of student experience, written by the students themselves; students' own reflections on their higher education experiences;
- *Chapter 3: Overview of basic information on progress* An overview of progress and outcomes, using information obtained at all stages of the research;
- *Chapters 4–6: Findings arising from student interviews* An analysis drawing together the range of information – both quantitative and qualitative – obtained through interviews conducted in the course of the second phase of the research, organised under the following headings:

  Chapter 4 Personal Circumstances
  Chapter 5 Academic Experiences
  Chapter 6 Goals and Guidance

- *Chapter 7: Assessment of SWAP* Consideration of the value of the SWAP scheme, based on the findings previously discussed and taking into account student's own retrospective reflections on the efficacy of the SWAP scheme and on their higher education experiences;

The appendices provide further information about the research methods, timetable of interviews and a summary of the cohorts progress. We have included as Appendix 3, very brief student histories of all the students who were part of the original study with a brief statement of plans, progress, and outcomes in respect of each student. These provide additional personal dimensions of the research. Mature students seem particularly apprehensive about examinations and we have included in Appendix 4 experiences of students who failed, or missed, examinations.

2 The graduates' perspectives

Introduction

What is it like to resume education after being at work and/or running a family? Is the experience of higher education fulfilling or frustrating? To give a flavour of the rewards and vicissitudes of being a mature student, some of the graduates were invited to describe their experience of SWAP and higher education in their own words, although the researchers suggested some areas that might be covered. These were: education and employment prior to Access; decision to undertake SWAP; entering higher education; experiences in higher education; present circumstances and plans for the future; reflections on SWAP as preparation for higher education.

Thus the five profiles which follow are former students' interpretations of their own 'history'. These stories are presented in their original form, with comments added by the researcher only for clarification (in bracketed italics), and alterations only to preserve the anonymity of people involved in SWAP or higher education (by removing reference to such personnel by name). Some students also wished anonymity, and chose to write under a pseudonym. The case numbers which appear after the histories allow cross reference to the relevant student history summary in Appendix 3.

Such a small group cannot reflect all viewpoints of our cohort but the group includes males and females, honours and ordinary graduates, scientists and humanities students, those who have been successful in finding work in their chosen field and those who have not at the time of writing. In this respect, it is a representative selection.

To complement these profiles, we go on to present a broader sample of students' reflections on their higher education experience, as expressed in the course of the interviews conducted.

Elizabeth Hull MA (Edinburgh)

I left school in 1973 having obtained some lack-lustre 'O' levels and dipped out of 'A' levels after half the course. By accident rather than design I found myself in nursing and subsequently undertook the psychiatric and general certificates followed some time later by midwifery. By the early 1980s I was beginning to think seriously about higher education but it wasn't until I began a truly ghastly advanced diploma in midwifery – which I felt absolutely sure was academically poor – that I became sufficiently disgruntled to make the move.

I was aware that higher education institutions usually viewed nursing and midwifery qualifications with a jaundiced eye and was not surprised when a meeting with the Dean of Admissions for Social Sciences at Edinburgh University bore this out. Although he was utterly charming, he obviously didn't consider my qualifications to have any great academic merit, and, since I didn't believe they had any either, I was more than happy with his suggestion that I apply for Access. The SWAP programme had the added safeguard of allowing me time to discover whether or not I had the ability and stamina to cope at university. It was also much more convenient than evening classes and the content more relevant than Highers/'A' levels.

That the first year at university was so straightforward was due entirely to Access. The preparation was so thorough and so relevant that all first year classes progressed smoothly – I think quite a lot of the Access course latterly was of first year undergraduate standard. I knew my way around the university, could cope with the library and had a few friends – again all due to Access. I also knew some of the staff and wasn't quite so scared of academics as I had been – in fact the standard of teaching and the seniority of the staff participating in Access was so high that some undergraduate courses were very shabby in comparison.

I'd managed to convert my full-time job into a half-time job share and negotiated to work at weekends so my financial and professional circumstances were secure. Later I met another mature student with a similar health service background who had pressured the University into letting her in on the strength of her nursing qualifications. She spent her first year feeling lost, lonely and disorientated. Access gave me a sense of worth, security and familiarity with the institution.

The first year was surprisingly hassle-free and my director of studies thought I was a 'solid student'. Because I had to keep a job going as well I largely missed out on the social side of University life and I also tended to take courses I was pretty confident of being able to cope with. I would have liked to have taken a few risks with courses but feared the stress – and was also scared of being seen to be lacking, of course.

Second year was a bit more problematic since one of my courses was quite gruelling and I disliked one of my personal tutors. I remember feeling pretty bleak over the autumn term. I was also having serious doubts about my chosen subject and was considering changing to a joint degree. Because departmental contact was low overall I totally failed to appreciate how lovely the department really was.

Third year and I foolishly made the change to a joint degree. The other department was badly organised and courses oversubscribed. Registering for courses was a nightmare and my director of studies had changed to a much less interested and informed individual so I found myself in a bit of a jam. I found the courses in this department much more competitive and demanding and the staff less approachable. To be seen to be struggling seemed to be merely a sign that you should do something else rather than a sign that you needed a bit more support and direction. In addition £5,000 worth of repair bills came my way and for the first time I had to go into debt. The summer exams were awful – split finals – and one of my marks was so poor that I didn't go out for a fortnight and thought about leaving.

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Fourth year I dropped the joint degree – a wise decision. My marks were good and I really started to enjoy the course and the department. I worried a lot about final degree marks since I'd had a few bad experiences the year before but the final breakdown showed a perfectly unremarkable, middle of the range, 2:1.

Access is still the best course I've ever undertaken. Perfect organisation, pitched at the right level, beautifully and lovingly taught with wonderful, approachable support. The preparation for the move to undergraduate was spot-on. Without Access, going to university would have been a miserable, lonely and daunting experience. For mature students, without the camaraderie of halls of residence and the wealth of new experiences that younger undergraduates have to distract them, there is just the academic; on its own that can be overwhelming. Access allowed me to relax enough to enjoy the university from the very beginning.

When I first applied for the Access course I made it clear that undertaking a degree did not necessarily mean that I intended to change careers – the academic stimulus was for my own satisfaction rather than as a means to an end. I'm still working as a midwife in a job share, an arrangement I'm perfectly happy with. By the second year at university I had evolved a plan to try to have two part-time jobs post-graduation, one keeping my midwifery skills up to scratch – and paying the bills – the other using my degree in some way. The second job would ideally be both temporary and part-time thus allowing me to take a few risks without incurring any major financial problems. So far this has worked reasonably well and I've been able to try my hand at a temporary teaching job and am presently involved in some research work. I can't see me changing this arrangement for the next year or so. Like many social science graduates I find myself attracted to teaching and research type jobs and would hope to become more involved in this.

(Case 45)

Pauline Greenhill MA (Dundee)

I was educated at Forfar Academy until leaving in 1959 at sixteen with the usual leaving certificate but no other qualifications. In October of that year I found employment with F. W. Woolworth which I left early in 1963 and for almost a year worked in Lockwoods Cannery. Then in April 1964 found myself with employment as a shop assistant with J. W. Lindsay (Draper) where I remained until 1968 when the owners retired. Four days later I was back in Woolworth and was there for almost 20 years until I was made redundant in 1988. This was not a good year personally due to the many family bereavements – my father and an aunt included, within six weeks of each other, due to cancer in both cases, although different varieties of the disease.

It was at this time I decided to make an attempt at my Highers in an effort to improve my chances of entering university. I took English and Modern Studies and the following year added to these by taking History, juggling my time at Forfar Academy (day classes) with a training programme at the Frigate Unicorn in Dundee and courses in Typing and Computing at Blackness Road College. Having gained all three Highers I

decided to aim for university and went to Angus College in an attempt to upgrade my Highers adding to these an 'O' grade in Biology, Physiology and Health and a further Typing course. It was while I was doing this that the guidance councillor at the college, knowing of my desire to enter university, suggested I try for the Access Course attached to Dundee University which was being established the following year – for which I am truly grateful.

While I was undertaking my Access Course I can honestly say there was only one tutor I, and others, found most unhelpful, this was the person taking the Computer Course. Things became so bad that after seeking advice I abandoned this aspect of the course after the first term and took instead Macro-Economics for the other two blocks. This went exceedingly well and I had every encouragement from all the other tutors as they assisted me to the best of their ability, and beyond in many cases, both with my work and also with personal issues at times when I felt events were overwhelming me. In this respect I have every praise for the Politics tutor who encouraged and constructively criticised when it was required, or just listened. The reason I chose the Access Course was because I am very well aware I am a plodder rather than a high flyer and also because my Higher results were frankly not good enough on their own, to warrant entry to university.

I enjoyed almost every moment of my time at university although this is not to say there were not times of self doubt when I wondered if I were not mad to even consider attempting to gain a degree and everything felt too much. However, since I am something of a perfectionist, this was probably partly responsible for the way I felt. I also have the sense, however, to realise when I have done my best or not tried hard enough and to accept the consequences of my own actions by putting things behind me and moving on to the next event.

There were a few bad periods when I seriously considered giving up due to events beyond my control – such as having to put down my beloved dog due to ill health. Another example was when I received an electricity demand for two hundred and eighty pounds on the morning of an examination when it was actually they who owed me three hundred and eighty pounds. Other times were in my first year and in third year when I seriously considered giving up until I thought of all the work I had put in to gain entrance to university and this was enough to cause me to reconsider. Luckily on the whole I had few real academic problems and most of these were caused by my own inability to obtain the appropriate texts when required for essays, particularly in third year for French History. The others were also of my own making – like sitting an examination I had not studied for, having got the dates mixed up. Luckily I passed but I realise that I could have done much better. On the whole books I could not obtain in the university library were substituted by similar from our own local library and apart from French History this generally worked. In general I only found two people whom I felt I could not relate to: one was my history tutor in first year and the other was the French history lecturer in third year. I generally preferred working at home to time spent in the university library as I felt it was too noisy and since graduating I have discovered other students also share this point of view. I did have a few health problems and on more than one occasion was advised to give up by my doctor but I decided that I would graduate

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regardless *(albeit with an ordinary degree to avoid a further year of study)*, and was more determined than ever to succeed.

I feel on the whole that the Access course was a good preparation from my own point of view and that I did this at the right time for me. However, after meeting students from other Access courses, I feel in retrospect perhaps Angus College was too lenient with us and that we could have been pushed harder. I will say also, however, that had this been the case I might not now writing this report with an MA after my name. I feel that I might still be tempted to consider another access course and would certainly recommend it to anyone in the position I experienced when I decided to attempt my own. I am, however, not certain that I would succeed to the same extent if I undertook such a course now as I feel that when I embarked on the course at Angus college it was the 'right time' for me personally as my health has somewhat deteriorated since then. I feel that the Access course and my time at university has given me more confidence in my own abilities.

I have been somewhat unlucky regarding my search for employment since I am still unemployed but have undertaken two periods of training for work doing research at the Frigate Unicorn. I feel my experience of study both on the Access course and university has been of great assistance in this respect as I have acquired the patience in searching for the requisite information for the project in hand. I also feel my time in higher education has broadened my outlook and therefore helped me be more tolerant of other people's firmly held beliefs which ought to be respected.

I also feel my grounding in History, always my favourite subject, has been of great assistance on my Training for Work Project at the Frigate Unicorn. Unfortunately this has been aborted early, the end of this month, due to cutbacks in funding and the introduction of Work Fare by the government. While this is disappointing, I am hopeful something else will turn up sooner or later. My health problems referred to earlier are an under-active thyroid gland and mild epilepsy which I felt I should mention as an incentive to other prospective students who may have similar problems, rather than an appeal for sympathy or condescension.

(Case 39)

John McLean BSc (Strathclyde)

I left Bellahouston Academy, Glasgow, aged 18, and subsequently qualified (day release etc.) as a materials technician on civil engineering construction sites. I had a talent for this and enjoyed the opportunities to work overseas particularly. My first marriage failed partly due to the demands imposed by working in Botswana and South Africa. I worked in Iran (1976 to 1979) during the reign of the Shah, and the civil war, and was effectively deported by the Green Guards when the Shah was deposed. So, when I married again (and acquired a step daughter), a lifestyle change was appropriate and I started a building company in Glasgow, and set up a factory in the Crossveggate Industrial Estate in Milngavie to fabricate conservatories. For a number of reasons, mostly connected to the

Conservative administration's hostility to small businesses, my business failed in 1989. We, as a family, lost our money, most of our possessions (including my wife's piano – she is a musician), and our house.

It should be apparent from the above that I am not afraid of hard work. So it came as a shock to realise that I was now unemployable. I was willing to do anything to support my family – labour, tend bars, salesman.... anything. But no-one would employ me. I was attending a job seeker's course at DSS Anniesland, after being unemployed for about a year, when I passed Anniesland College one day, and went in to enquire about any form of retraining they might suggest and they told me about SWAP. I discussed it with my wife who was now working intermittently as a freelance viola player, and the following Monday I started at Stowe College to do a Science and Technology Access course.

In the intervening days I had visited what is now Glasgow Caledonian University and there were some degree courses they would accept me for on the spot, which was encouraging. I was concerned because I had been away from full time education (and had not been particularly successful as a school boy!) for almost thirty years, and was convinced that the first thing I had to learn was how to learn. Also, to maintain the support of my family I had to start being successful again. I couldn't afford to fail or stumble – I would only get one chance to do this. Thus, the Access Course was preferable to Highers because it involved a re-introduction to the practice of study and a concentrated course that guaranteed a university place at the end of one academic year. I was also impressed by the level of commitment and apparent competence in Stowe College, particularly in the departments of Maths, Physics, Computing and Communication skills. And I liked the idea of being in a class of people in an approximation of the same circumstances in which I found myself.

My intention was to study some form of engineering. To my surprise, I found that the part of the Access Course that was increasingly catching my imagination was the study of Physics. I made discrete inquiries at Jordanhill Teacher Training College about the viability of becoming a teacher of Physics, which at that time was excellent, and obtained the support of my family for a change of objective. We could all be flexible in our objectives because of the nature of the (Access) course, and because by doing modules one was aware of how much progress had been made. The prospect was somewhat daunting – Physics at university carries some implications of difficulty and complexity. Most people think of it as a somewhat demanding course. I visited the departments at Strathclyde, Glasgow and Glasgow Caledonian. The latter I felt was not the course I wished to study, and Glasgow I felt were unused to dealing with people of my age and with my fears about the mathematics involved. However, Strathclyde took my appearance in their stride and were very specific about the remedial actions they could offer committed students and the support services *in situ*., particularly the entire staff of the university's Centre for Academic Practice, and one of the key staff of the Physics department.

The Access Course had done its work. The modules had eased me into the practice of learning and meant that I could measure my progress through the year and maintain morale. University would be different! To facilitate the transition between modules and

university courses I joined the University Summer School in order to get a 'dry run' at the different style and demands of tertiary education at this level, and some practice of sitting university-style exams which would be marked but did not threaten my already guaranteed place. This was successful, good for morale, and gave me a flying start when the university course started in earnest. I cannot stress too strongly how important the Summer Course was for me. I would have risked failure without it.

What followed was a skin of the teeth experience. I used the Centre for Academic Practice to vet my learning plans in the first year, and that was very helpful. However, I achieved the minimum number of passes to get me through to second year. Then I got the minimum number of passes to get into junior honours year (still progress though, as I avoided having to do either a pass degree, or a Science Studies degree) and ultimately got a lower second class honours degree in Physics, which still thrills me as I feel that this is the best I could do, and then only if I worked my socks off.

While this is going on, my wife is working on a casual basis with various orchestras. If the work is there she'll do it – if not we suffer; not so much a 'feast or famine' as 'fish supper or famine'. My step-daughter is herself a student at Edinburgh, but with no possible support forthcoming from us. She is now a BSc and BA(Hons) and a tough cookie withal; she's had to be. My son did P5, P6 and P7 and then got an assisted place to Hutchesons Grammar school. The fabric of my family life did not disintegrate, but don't ever think it's been easy.

Throughout the course my mathematics was barely adequate, but I continued to be thrilled by the Physics. My transferable skills such as organisation, time management, planning, communications etc. were of great value to both me, and ultimately, to a lot of my younger colleagues. I fenced epee in the university fencing team – no blue, unfortunately. I loved the course and being a bald, grey bearded student. The other two mature students in the department both graduated also.

There are obvious limitations in SCOTVEC modules as preparation for this type of university course (e.g. modular nature, short duration, assessments *etc.*) But for me, this was adequately bridged by Summer School. I would still be on the dole without SWAP. I was middle aged, broke, and my *amour-propre* had taken a beating, and no employer wanted a failed director of companies like me for anything. Knowing what I know now, and after what I have experienced, I would do it exactly the same way.

After graduation, I studied at Jordanhill for a year and got my PGCE as a teacher of Physics and Science on 14/6/96. I was taken on as a supply teacher at Dumbarton Academy on 13/08/96, two days before the term started, and taught there until Christmas. West Dunbartonshire Region were sufficiently impressed to immediately offer me more supply work at Braidfield High School, Clydebank which should last at least until May. I have worked continuously since graduating as PGCE. We now have a future.

(Case 58)

Maggie Cuthill LLB (Edinburgh)

I left school in 1975, with two Highers, and began an HND in Hotel, Catering and Institutional Management at Sheffield Polytechnic. I didn't like the course and came home at the end of first year. I took a job as a trainee manageress in a country hotel, intending to apply for other courses. Events intervened. Twelve years, three children and a rocky marriage later, I made a tentative attempt at doing something for myself outwith the domestic arena.

'New Horizons' (*part time course, offering a variety of subjects, aimed at people who have been out of work for some time*) at the Department of Continuing Education, Edinburgh University was an enjoyable experience. New people, no exam pressure and the realisation that learning for its own sake, through study and discussion with a diverse range of people, was very stimulating and satisfying. The course co-ordinator was an encouraging and supportive influence and a great promoter of the Access course. I was unsure about pursuing a degree and opted for 'Return to Work or Study' course (*course designed to ease the transition to work or study, can involve a series of one-day job placements*) the following year, realised I did want to go to University, and was accepted for Access in 1991.

The first term was varied, different subjects, narrowing to two in the second and third terms, extremely good lecturers and tutors, lots of essays with prompt and constructive feedback. As well as the educational content, I became familiar with the geography of the University. Sounds silly, but I'd spent fifteen years in a rural area, more used to pushing a pram and cajoling toddlers than going into new situations. I didn't want the familiarity of doing Highers at the local school, nor the isolation and lengthy time scale of an Open University degree.

I began a degree in Social Policy and Law in 1992. At the end of the first year I transferred to the Law Faculty. Not the simple process it sounds. Two interviews and an extra half Law course 'to prove my commitment' were required before admittance was bestowed.

The Law faculty is insular, isolated from the rest of the University. Students are not encouraged to take outside subjects. In retrospect, I enjoyed the breadth of first year, when my subjects included Social Policy and Economic History.

'New Horizons', 'Return to Work or Study', and Access had one thing in common: the emphasis on confidence building verged on the condescending, an attitude that increasingly irritated me. However, this was more than compensated for by the fact that everyone involved – in the Access course particularly – was enthusiastic, both about their subjects and the students' achievements. I did not find this to be the case in the Law Faculty. I did twelve law subjects, each with different lecturers and tutors. There was little opportunity to establish contact, to become an individual rather than a faceless student. Essays and exams could take an age to be returned with little feedback or opportunity for discussion. However, I survived, with two resits, and graduated LLB in 1995.

On reflection, Access, as well as enabling me to go to University, provided me with a network of good, supportive friends. Not everyone selects exactly the same timetable so it can take a while to establish regular contact if you don't know anyone. From day

one, we had a support system. On top of studying, we had to contend with sick kids, sick husbands, ageing parents, breast cancer, bereavement, house moves, car trouble and financial trouble, exacerbated by huge phone bills, it must be said. Mature students have more in common with working parents than with other students but few people in work understand why anyone would wish to return to study.

I was a single parent, living an hour's drive from Edinburgh when I began full time education. Choosing courses was influenced by their timing. Early or late lectures meant more child care. Time in the library was limited for the same reason. When I got back home, I was a mum until the children went to bed. Essay deadlines were met by working all night. I can't really use the children as an excuse there – the study skills content of the Access course bypassed me entirely – I knew the theory but was still an immature student when it came to application.

Exams over, the end of term signified party time for most of the students; for us, it meant being responsible for organising the party. As they set off for the pub, I was rushing home to make tablet for the Brownie 'Bring and Buy', or make enough paper flowers to decorate the exterior of the house when my son was taking part in the local Gala Day. I remember the look of horror on the invigilator's face as I left one of my finals an hour early, explaining that one of my daughters was due back from her first trip abroad with the school. And no, that wasn't one of the ones I failed.

Family demands have no regard for University timetabling. They did provide a perspective though – no point in becoming overwhelmed by the workload, as some of the younger students did, when so many other things required immediate attention.

The above perhaps sounds as if further education was one hard slog. It wasn't. The Law Faculty's attitude wasn't as encouraging as that of pre-university courses, but I'd made the decision to return to study as an adult knowing my circumstances, and they were probably correct in assuming I was therefore adult enough to cope. It was a very challenging way to spend four years and I'm surprised at how much I miss it.

I hoped a degree would improve my career prospects. I'm currently doing a job I could easily have done four years ago and taking a course in Computer and Business skills to improve my practical abilities. Job applications disappear into a big black hole. I'd rather write an essay than attempt yet another lengthy application form for no response.

Would I do it again? Most definitely, yes. I found the experience worthwhile and invigorating. I had tremendous support from family and friends and the pleasure of seeing my parents, both in their seventies, fit to burst with pride the day I graduated. Job or no job, the personal satisfaction is immense. I'm Maggie Cuthill LLB. And proud of it.

(Case 21)

Esme Docherty BA (Strathclyde)

I left school when I was fifteen with two 'O' Levels, English and History. I didn't really enjoy school and dogged a lot of classes in fourth year: hence only two O Levels, although I sat seven. My most endearing memory of school was being told I was stupid

and wouldn't amount to anything. This stayed with me for many years and for a long time I believed it.

After school I started work as an office junior. It was easy to get a job, there were plenty on offer. I had various clerical jobs and eventually became supervisor of a clerical section in a large organisation. I married in 1976 and left work to have my first child in 1980. My second child was born in 1985.

I was bored being at home all day, so when my eldest child began nursery school in 1983 I started attending the local adult education centre. From 1983 to 1989 I studies for 'O' level Arithmetic and Higher English and SCOTVEC modules in maths. I also attended a part-time course for mature students at Glasgow University (English Literature and Philosophy). It had begun to dawn on me that perhaps I had the ability to study at a higher level, maybe even a degree!

1990/91 I attended the one year Access to Science & Technology course at Stow College with a view to going on either an HND or degree course. I had no real plans for future employment at this time. What I did know was that I didn't want to be stuck in a dead end clerical job when I did go back to work. The Access course seemed ideal; it would give me the necessary qualifications and a guaranteed place in further education in only a year, whereas the traditional route via Highers would take much longer. A further important factor in choosing Access was bursary support, essential in my case to cover the cost of childcare and travelling expenses.

The year at Stow was intensive but enjoyable. The students all got on well together and helped each other when we had problems with the work. Although I passed all the modules I felt there was little time to really get to know all the material we were covering before moving on to the next module. Everything was crammed in and the year passed in a blur. The guidance and careers advice on the course was practically non existent. What guidance we were given was less than helpful, being geared towards school leavers. Despite this I did feel prepared, though a little apprehensive about university.

In 1991, with great expectations and excitement, I began a BSc in the engineering faculty at Strathclyde University. My life was totally dominated by study. The timetable was nine to five of lectures, workshops and labs and at least three to four hours study at night. I felt my children hardly knew me anymore. I was always busy. I had no social life. Within a comparatively short time I was physically exhausted and realised I was ill prepared to study engineering at that level. I was constantly struggling to keep up. I also felt very isolated, being the only mature student over thirty and the only student with children. The other students were quite supportive but had no concept of the problems I faced juggling study and family commitments. Although the staff treated me the same as the other students, with total indifference, I always had the feeling they were just waiting for me to give up. I was only the second Access student in this particular department – the previous student had left after a few weeks.

The first year exams were a nightmare! I failed three, including one of the essential classes to progress to second year. I felt a total failure and faced with a year out or dropping out altogether. Between the first exam diet and resists I had time to assess my situation. I sought help from the student advisory who were very supportive. They

provided all the necessary information required to apply to the Arts Faculty and Students' Grants. Before the resists I had applied and been accepted for a BA. My existing credits were not allowed to be carried over and I started my second first year.

The Arts Faculty was so different. There were many more mature students, the majority of them female with families, so I identified easily with them and felt I fitted in. The timetable was less intensive, with more individual study which allowed me to manage my domestic responsibilities. I thoroughly enjoyed the first three years and managed with no real problems and no resists. I didn't regret changing my course, in fact it was the best decision I ever made. My only problem was writing essays in first year. The Access to Science & Technology had obviously not prepared me for this. I made a lot of friends at university and became part of a group of mature students who helped each other with course material, exam revision and sympathy and vodka when the going got tough. My life was still dominated by university and study but I enjoyed the experience and had time for may family and social life, baby-sitters allowing.

Honours year was the most difficult. The class workload was heavy plus the dissertation. During this year I also had various personal problems which caused a lot of stress. However, the staff in the department I was studying in were very supportive, especially my dissertation supervisor. My friends and family were also a great help. I doubt I could have managed the year without all their support. The student advisory were also helpful providing stress counselling when I needed it. Although it was a difficult time I'm glad I stuck it out. It was a great feeling when I got that 2:1 Honours.

Overall Access was helpful in preparing me for full-time study but left me ill prepared for studying at university level. One of the main problems with the access modular system was the amount of work to be covered in a year. The work was covered so quickly there was little time to fully grasp and master all the knowledge and skills before moving on to the next module. At times they seemed to be taught in isolation rather than building up a depth and breadth of subject knowledge. Little time was spent on practical applications and problem solving, this caused difficulties at university for this level of study is based on these particular skills.

Attending university had been one of the highlights of my life so far and on the whole the experience had been rewarding, fulfilling and enjoyable. One criticism I would like to make is the so-called support offered to mature students. Universities in their prospectus actively encourage mature students, advertising crèche facilities and support systems. However, the reality is more like 'bums on seats' once you are there, no one has time for you. Although I was given a lot of support from staff in the Arts Faculty, my experience seems to have been an exception rather than the norm.

I am now more confident and sure of myself but at the same time I am less content with my life, though this may be related to the fact I still haven't found any suitable employment. The only work I have found is temporary clerical work using the skills I had before my children were born.

(Case 69)

Post Script: Emma Docherty (aged 11)

When my Mum went to college I hated it. She was always in the bedroom revising and studying. First year was even worse. We hardly ever saw Mum plus eating burgers, fishfingers and easy cook micro-wave meals every night wasn't very nice at all.

When she started her second first year it was a lot better. For one thing she was a lot happier and didn't shout so much. We had nice meals for a change and she made lots of new friends. I made friends with their children too. We all went on holiday to Whitley Bay together as well that was good fun. The graduation was OK but a bit boring. I think my Mum is really clever but I think she is stupid as well for leaving school. She could have went to university when she was young and got a good job but I am proud of her anyway.

■ Reflections on higher education

At the close of each interview, students were asked if they wished to make any further remarks concerning their previous year in higher education. This provided an opportunity for students to sum up their attitude to their higher education experiences, as well as allowing certain specific comments to be noted which would otherwise have been missed. Many students' attitudes to higher education were completely enthusiastic; others were more qualified, but few were pessimistic or negative in general terms, although several expressed criticisms about specific aspects of their experience. What follows is a reasonably representative selection of the views expressed.

Enthusiasm

'I enjoyed every minute. I would do it all again: it really helped my self esteem.'

'I'm glad I did it. I enjoyed it and learned a lot over the piece.'

'I really enjoyed the experience – it was more than just a degree.'

'I enjoyed the degree. I wish I'd done it when I left school, but I didn't get the guidance to help me back then.'

'I've thoroughly enjoyed this year despite the stresses of exam time.'

Criticism

'My biggest concern is that tutors can't see when you're struggling. There is no emotional support: they never seem to get to know you as a person. They set deadlines and never explore why you may miss them. And they aren't very sensitive, especially when they're from different social backgrounds.'

'Library hours of opening don't suit mature students. For example, books taken overnight on short loan have to be taken after 4.30 and returned by 9.30 and I can't fit that in with the children. Also, the library didn't have some of the book on the recommended reading list. So a group of five of us have got together to buy one copy of certain book to share between us.'

'I feel that my course director is biased against mature students. I won the class prize last year and I think he thought that it was wrong that a mature student won, because he made comments about what a big investment it is for a person of my age to pursue a PhD.'

'I think that quite a few of us expected it not to be so badly organised. It is stunning how badly organised and unfair it can be. The department has been completely in the wrong on a number of occasions and they have closed ranks against the students and there is no place to appeal.'

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Pessimism

'I've found it very stressful. I went into higher education primarily for self fulfilment as I think my age is against me in seeking a career, but in view of the stress I'm beginning to wonder whether or not it's worth it.'

Cautionary notes

'If anyone is considering it then they should be sure they want to do it. Those who weren't sure were those who failed or gave up. Sometimes it's like a mountain falling on you but you just have to plod on.'

'Through it all I did enjoy it. It was different to what I thought it was going to be. It was different to the Access course, where we were cocooned. Mainly I was getting used to academic life. It can be cold. The work helped – new friends, new people.'

'I would have liked an opportunity to meet and perhaps work with older mature students. You are accepted as a mature student, but you are different and don't meet other students socially. That is fair enough, but a once a year party for former Access students would be good.'

Summary

What many of these case histories and comments highlight is the determination and resilience of students to succeed in higher education despite a variety of personal and/or academic difficulties. Time and again these former Access students highlight strategies for overcoming or circumventing problems and pitfalls with a marked degree of confidence.

Comments about the ability of Access courses as preparation for higher education are generally positive. However, the case histories in particular begin to raise questions about the ability of courses such as Access to prepare students for the variety of experiences and difficulties they may encounter in higher education.

3 Overview of students' progress

■ Summary

This research concerns the experiences of a group of one hundred Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) students. Progress and outcomes in respect of these students can be summarised as follows:

Progress to higher education

- 89 of the 100 students of the sample who successfully completed their Access course, are known to have progressed, or to have firmly intended to progress, to higher education following SWAP. Nine did not go on to higher education. (No information is available on the destination of the remaining two students.)
- Reasons behind failure to go to higher education following SWAP can be summarised as follows: failure to complete SWAP successfully [2]; lack or inadequacy of grant funding [3]; personal or family circumstances [3]; unknown [1].
- 48 of these students [54%] remained in contact with the research, while 41[46%] lost contact; for reasons discussed in Appendix 2, this loss of contact was greater among science students.

Educational outcomes

Of the 48 students who remained in contact with the research:

- 40 obtained a higher education qualification
- 5 dropped out of higher education due to academic problems, ill health, or preference for a job
- 3 remained undergraduates on completion of the research.

Of the 40 students who remained in contact with the research and obtained a higher education qualification:

- 23 obtained an Honours Degree
- 14 obtained an Ordinary Degree
- 3 obtained some other qualification
- Around half went on to further study, or planned to do so.

Employment Outcomes

For those who were not continuing their studies, around half were in employment in their field of choice; half had not found suitable employment when they were last interviewed.

Introduction

This section of the report aims to give an overview of the progress of the students since starting Access. Detailed information on cohort history is provided in Appendix 3, which takes the form of a table summarising cohort progress followed by a brief history for each student, with these histories grouped according to the categories used in the table. This chapter summarises and discusses this information. For ease of cross reference, the Roman numerals which appear beside the various categories in the appendix table are also used as identifiers in this chapter.

SWAP history

As Table 3.1 shows, the composition of the original cohort group was almost evenly split between science based and humanities Access courses, with a slight predominance of females over males. However, from the outset the male/female split within the two types of Access courses was uneven, reflecting the predominance of males on science courses and, to an even greater extent, females on humanities-based Access courses.

Table 3.1 Composition of cohorts on commencing Access

Access Course	Male	Female	ALL
Science	28	20	48
Humanities	14	38	52
TOTAL	42	58	100

All but two students completed the Access course successfully [Group I]; both had been on science-based Access courses. One had experienced difficulties with physics and had decided to drop out of Access at an early stage. The other had found the whole course more difficult than expected and had gained insufficient modules for progression to higher education; he felt that had he first undertaken a pre-Access course then be might have fared better.

Commencing higher education

Two students could not be contacted following Access in order to ascertain their intentions regarding progression to higher education, and seven did not intend to progress to higher education when last contacted [Group II]. Information is available regarding the reasons for this in six cases:

- Two were very keen to go on to higher education but faced considerable disappointment with the discovery that no grant would be payable or that the level of grant payable would be insufficient.

- One had been accepted for a place but had turned it down in the face of lack of confidence in her capabilities and in view of prospective difficulties of managing on a grant; however, she saw education primarily as a means of self-fulfilment and felt that SWAP had been beneficial in this respect.
- One was hampered by the lack of locally available higher education as she had a family and was unwilling to disrupt her children's education by a move to a new area.
- One moved abroad as a result of her husband's job and found that her SWAP qualification was not accepted as a basis for admission to higher education.
- One developed serious health problems and was unable to take up the place offered.

The remaining 89 students made known a firm intention of going on to higher education, although two students delayed entry for a year (in one case personal circumstances precluded the necessary travel, in the other financial difficulties underlay the delay). Composition of this group is shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Composition of cohorts commencing higher education

Field of Study	Male	Female	ALL
Science	25	14	39
Humanities	13	37	50
TOTAL	38	51	89

By this stage, arts students somewhat outnumbered scientists, as a result of the disproportionate loss of science students in Groups I and II (seven scientists as compared to four arts students) and because three of the four students who decided to change their field of study between Access and higher education moved away from science-based study. The details of this group are as follows:

Students who changed field of study between Access and higher education

- Two had been on SWAP science courses but decided on higher education courses in hospitality
- One had been on a SWAP science course but went on to study for an MA which included mathematics as well as humanities subjects
- One had undertaken humanities based SWAP, but went on to nursing studies.

Unfortunately it was not possible to study this group as a whole over time, as only the student on the MA course remained in contact with the research; she did not appear to experience any difficulties as a result of having changed from a science-based Access course to a humanities-based degree.

Higher education outcomes

The 89 students who made known a firm intention to progress to higher education following completion of SWAP can be split into the following categories:

- 40 who remained in contact with the research at least until obtaining a first higher education qualification [Groups VII – IX]
- 41 who subsequently lost contact with the research [Groups III and IV]
- 3 who remained undergraduates on completion of the research [Group V]
- 5 who did not complete a course of higher education [Group V].

Thus information on educational outcome is available in respect of a total of 45 students, and unknown in respect of the remaining 44. Before turning to consideration of these groups, it should be noted that two more students decided to change from science to humanities based courses during higher education and that one student made a change in the opposite direction. Details of these and other course changes occurring during higher education are provided in Chapter 6.

Students who obtained higher education qualifications

Forty students remained in contact with the research at least until obtaining a first higher education qualification [Groups VII–IX]. Information on the qualifications attained by these students is presented in Table 3.3 below.

Table 3.3 Qualifications obtained

Qualifications Obtained	Science Students	Humanities Students	All
(VI) Ordinary Degree	4	9	14
(VII) Honours Degree	9	15	23
(VIII) Higher National Certificate	1	1	2
(VIII) HND+Advanced Diploma	1	0	1
TOTAL	15	25	40

Post graduate qualifications	Science Students	Humanities Students	All
Master of Science	1	1	2
Certificate in Education	1	1	2

As a result of the disproportionate number of science students lost to the research, and, to a lesser extent, of a disproportionate transfer of field of study – five science students transferring to humanities and only two making a change in the opposite direction – those who are known to have attained a qualification are

predominantly humanities rather than science students. And, largely because males predominated on science courses, females account for around two-thirds of those who are known to have obtained a higher education qualification [25 of the forty students].

Turning to the qualifications attained, the main point of note is that almost twice as many students graduated with honours as opposed to ordinary degrees. Four of the students had already completed post graduate qualifications. However, several others had embarked on a course of post graduate study or anticipated doing so in the foreseeable future (circumstances following graduation are considered below).

Students lost to the research

A substantial proportion of the cohort group was lost to the research over the course of this longitudinal study. Seven were last contacted subsequent to completion of SWAP, at which point they had indicated a firm intention to proceed to higher education [Group III]. However, the majority of the 'lost' students – 34 – were in touch with the research at some stage during higher education but lost contact prior to attaining a qualification [Group IV]; the vast majority of this group [27] did not remain in touch with the research beyond the end of their first year in higher education. In addition, a further student lost contact before completing a degree course, having first attained an HNC. As discussed in Chapter 1, a considerable element of the loss of research subjects occurred between the two phases of the research and this loss was disproportionately specific to science students, in respect of whom a gap of two years elapsed between interview phases.

Remaining undergraduates

Three students remained undergraduates at the final stage of the research [Group V], as a result of having taken time out from their studies due to personal difficulties. One of the three remained on extended time out at the final phase of the research, but was determined to return to higher education when the family's financial circumstances permitted.

Students who dropped out of higher education

Five of those who progressed to higher education dropped out of their courses before attaining a qualification [Group VI]. In addition, one student completed an HNC then embarked on a degree course, which he did not complete. Reasons for not completing courses are available in five of the six cases:

- Three students had academic problems and failed the course. Two failed the first year of science courses (Engineering and Physics) and one failed the second year of a BA in social science (having entered in second year following attainment of an HNC).

- One student had no academic problems but was not enjoying his BA course and left early in first year to take up the offer of a job.
- One student experienced a breakdown in health during first year in the face of personal problems and left her social science course on medical advice.

These six students represent 13% of the total of 45 students in respect of whom information is available (11% if the student who was successful at HNC level is excluded). However, it is reasonable to suppose that students who have dropped out of higher education would be more likely to fail to respond to requests for interview and information regarding their experience (either in the belief that they are no longer of relevance to the research, or from a wish to avoid dwelling on a disappointing experience) than would those who were continuing, and so the actual drop out rate is likely to be somewhat higher.

Beyond higher education

Table 3.4 summarises the most recent information available regarding the circumstances of the forty students who remained in touch with the research at least until completion of a first higher education qualification. This information does not relate to a fixed time period following completion of SWAP or first higher education qualification. (SWAP science students in the cohort group completed the access course one year in advance of the humanities students: thus the two groups of students entered higher education at different times. Also, several students who provided information following graduation in 1994 or 1995 have since lost contact with the research. In these circumstances, and given that this report represents the final opportunity to report on progress, it was felt to be appropriate to give the most recent information available in respect of each student.)

Table 3.4 Graduate outcomes

STATUS	Science Students	Humanities Students	All
Further Study – in progress	5	4	9
Further Study – pending	1	1	2
Working in job of choice	7	6	13
Seeking Work – working	1	3	4
Seeking Work – training	0	2	2
Seeking Work – unemployed	2	7	9
Unknown	0	1	1
TOTAL	16	24	40

Notes (1) Outcomes in respect of the two students whose highest known qualification was an HNC rather than a degree are included in this table.

(2) Those working in job of choice include one arts graduate and one science graduate in temporary posts in their preferred area of employment but seeking permanent work.

The figure of nine students who had embarked on a further course of study includes one student who had begun a degree course following completion of an HNC. The remaining eight were on post graduate courses, while a further two were awaiting the commencement of post graduate studies. Two students seeking work mentioned that they might seek a further qualification in order to improve their job prospects. Additionally, two of the working students had begun to study for further qualifications with their employers' encouragement, another had plans to do so. Thus, taking into account the four students who had already obtained post-graduate qualifications (see Table 3.3), it emerges that more than one third of the graduates (15/40) went on to further study, or planned to do so.

Of those who were not involved or about to become involved in further study, just under half – 13 – informed the research team that they had found employment of their choosing (included in this figure is the student who dropped out of a degree course following successful completion of an HNC). The student whose present circumstances are unknown could be added to this group with a reasonable degree of certainty: it was not possible to interview her following graduation as she was in the process of moving to London, but she had been in journalistic employment throughout higher education and intended to continue in this field of work.

Fifteen of the forty students had not found suitable employment when last interviewed. Six of this group were involved in some form of work or training for work when last contacted, but nine were unemployed. Most of this group had only recently graduated when last in contact with the research However, three of the fifteen, including two of the nine unemployed students, had been graduates for more than a year.

Considering that graduate routes to employment are often protracted, even in times of fuller employment, it is as yet difficult to comment on whether these mature graduates have been more or less able than other students to capitalise on their higher education.

4 Personal factors affecting students in higher education

Summary

The group as a whole covered a wide age range, with some being young single people living in their family home while others, including some aged over fifty at the outset of their higher education experience, were old enough to have families who had grown up and left home. However, more typically the students were middle-aged and had heavy financial and family responsibilities.

Mature students can and do face a delicate balancing act in coping with the needs of family while attempting to do justice to their academic work. Many of the study group were coping with the demands of dependent children and/or had concerns relating to the care and well-being of elderly parents.

Six out of ten students had experienced problems arising from some aspect of their personal circumstances (excluding finance) in the course of one or more of the academic years focused on in interview. Ill health was a relatively frequent problem, whether through illness on the part of the students themselves or of close family. Many simply found their everyday lives sufficiently full and demanding to impinge on their studies. Such problems were more likely to be experienced by women proportionally given that there are more women in the sample.

Six out of ten students had experienced problems concerning finance in the course of one or more of the academic years concerned. These problems could be severe and often posed a considerable challenge to the motivation of the students concerned. In this context, it is notable that, having entered higher education *via* SWAP, the students had all spent a year on bursary support prior to commencing higher education, and many faced difficulties arising from coping on limited means for a prolonged period.

Around four in ten students had undertaken term time work outwith their course of study at some point during the academic years on which the interviews were focused. Women were proportionately more likely to work than men. The vast majority had undertaken work in order to help finance their studies. However, most of those who had undertaken paid employment still found themselves in financial difficulties.

In terms of the extent to which such problems led to academic difficulties, the following picture emerges:

- Just over half of all students [51%] had experienced academic difficulties stemming from some aspect of their personal circumstances in the course of at least one of the academic years concerning which they were interviewed.
- Such difficulties were specified in the course of one third of the interviews conducted [34%].
- Women were more likely than men to experience academic problems as a result of the impact of personal circumstances: these were mentioned in the course of 39% of interviews with women as compared to 19% of interviews with men.

Taking into account the range and extent of problems experienced and the severity of demands posed by personal and financial circumstances and family commitments, a predominant picture emerges of students who were determined to persevere in the face of adversity.

Introduction

Before looking in detail at the students' academic experiences, it is relevant to consider the personal circumstances which provided the context for their studies. In particular, we look at the demands of family, the occurrence of personal and financial problems, and the employment circumstances of these students during term time.

Findings relate to the ninety-eight interviews conducted with forty nine students in the course of phase two of the research (details of the composition of this group and the educational stages pertaining to the interviews conducted are given in Appendix 2). In terms of the areas of interest identified at the outset of phase two of the research, this chapter has a bearing on problems and their resolution, and roles and relationships.

Personal circumstances

The majority of students were between 25 and 50 and had heavy financial and family responsibilities. However, the group as a whole covered a wide age range, with some being young single people living in their family home while others, including some aged over fifty at the outset of their higher education experience, were old enough to have families who had grown up and left home.

As mature students, many of the study group were coping with the demands of dependent children or had concerns relating to the care and well-being of elderly parents; some were coping with demands arising from the needs of both older and younger generations. Table 4.1 below summarises the position in terms of the care of dependent children and the experience of family circumstances – other than financial problems – which had an emotional and/or practical impact.

Table 4.1 Family circumstances

Family Circumstances	Dependent Children		Other Family Demands	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Male Students	7	9	6	10
Female Students	14	19	11	22
TOTAL STUDENTS	21	28	17	32

Looking at the data on both aspects of family circumstances on a student by student basis, it emerges that a substantial proportion of these students – 29 of the females (58%) and 8 of the males (exactly half) – had the care of children or experienced other demands related to the nuclear or extended family. Although the proportion of males with dependent children is similar to the proportion of females, it is likely that, in line with the norm, the onus on the female students was greater in this respect, particularly as twelve of the fourteen women with dependent children were single mothers (no single fathers were involved in the study). This is borne out by the findings shown in Table 4.2, which indicate that a higher proportion of women (64%) than of men (50%) reported that problems relating to their personal circumstances had arisen at some point in the course of the academic year(s) concerning which they were interviewed. (Women were, on average, interviewed more often than men. However, when this is taken into account the relatively greater likelihood of females encountering problems arising from personal circumstances remains the same.) Because of the previously discussed concentration of women on humanities courses and males on science courses, such problems were more common among humanities students than among scientists.

Table 4.2 Problems relating to personal circumstances (at any time)

	Males	Females	ALL
Yes	8	21	29
No	8	12	20
TOTAL	16	33	49

The figures shown in Table 4.2 relate to expressed difficulties, including problems specific to the students themselves, such as poor health, and to circumstances which were not intrinsically problematic (for example, a move of house) or which were even joyful (the advent of fatherhood), but which could nonetheless affect ability to complete course work efficiently. In these respects the frame of reference used is wider than that of Table 4.1 above; however, Table 4.2 does not automatically include dependent children, whose presence will come into play only if this was noted as problematic in terms of undertaking a course of study.

Looking at the group as a whole, it emerges that six out of ten students had experienced problems arising from some aspect of their personal circumstances in the course of one or more of the academic years focused on in interview. (Such difficulties were mentioned in the course of 45% of all interviews.) Ill health was a relatively frequent problem, whether through illness on the part of the students themselves or of an elderly parent. In addition, several students had experienced bereavement. Some simply found their everyday lives full and demanding – as a single parent with a disabled child and two young adult offspring remarked:

'Generally, life gets in the way of studying.'

Others were having to cope with considerable simultaneous stresses in their personal lives due to adverse personal circumstances. For example, one student had to cope with a daughter with manic depression, a son with a drink problem, a sister who was not supporting her decision to study, and a brother who had had an accident (and was also coping with severe financial difficulties).

Problems arising from personal circumstances are not easily resolved; often it is more a matter of finding ways of living with the difficulties which arise. Indeed, some of the circumstances mentioned – such as the advent of fatherhood or a change of house – might well have been highly desirable in themselves, but nonetheless posed challenges for those involved in a course of study at the time. Other circumstances may be most unwelcome but quite beyond the student's control – bereavement being a classic example. However, there were instances where staff at higher education institutions were required to deal with the consequences of the impact of personal issues on students' course work; in these circumstances students generally reported that staff had been helpful and supportive.

Although personal problems could, and did, impinge on studies, some students found themselves in circumstances where higher education provided a welcome focus in the face of personal difficulties. For example, one student who had separated from her husband during her honours year noted that university provided 'therapy' and kept her occupied.

It is also worth noting that, although the primary interest of the research in this regard lies in the impact of personal circumstances on academic performance, the converse could also apply. For example, one married man with two teenage children who was studying for an honours degree in civil engineering clearly faced difficulties in both respects. Regarding the impact of family on academic work, he remarked:

'Family circumstances meant I couldn't spend as much time as I would have liked on my dissertation'

At the same time, there were tensions in the opposite direction:

'Study time interferes with family life: I have to try to keep everyone happy....'

These remarks illustrate the delicate balancing act which mature students can and do face in coping with the needs and demands of family commitments while attempting to do justice to their academic work.

Financial problems

Students were asked whether they had experienced any financial problems over the course of the previous academic year. Results are shown in Appendix 5 Chart 2. Findings can be summarised as follows:

- Six out of ten students had experienced problems concerning finance in the course of one or more of the academic years concerning which they were interviewed.
- Financial problems were mentioned in the course of around four in ten interviews.
- Although females were more likely than males to have experienced problems concerning finance in the course of at least one of the academic years concerning which they were interviewed [64% as compared to 56%], a higher proportion of male interviews [63% as compared to 35%] concerned academic years which had involved financial problems. This was because those males who had financial difficulties were more likely to experience these year after year than were their female counterparts.

Financial difficulties tended to increase as time went on, with problems resulting from the cumulative effect of managing on a low income over a prolonged period. In addition, one student was obliged to take extended time out from her studies as a result of financial difficulties experienced by the family business (she does not feature in the above statistics because this time out meant that she was not interviewed concerning academic experience). Most commonly students said that they were experiencing general financial difficulties which they had learned to live with. However, several had undoubtedly experienced a great deal of stress and worry as a result of an acute shortage of money. Others had managed to stave off financial insecurity through taking up paid employment; this, however, could bring its own problems through taking up time that could otherwise have been spent on study (students' experiences of work in term time is discussed below).

Two students specified financial problems which were intrinsic to the operation of their course. One was undertaking a degree course on block release, and her employer paid only part of the cost of travel to her place of study in the south of England; she was obliged to accept funding from her fiancée towards the rest of the cost. The other had been on work placement throughout the 1994/95 session and had found his waged income severely stretched as he required to take lodgings near his place of work as well as continuing the upkeep of his family home; this is a difficulty which mature students would be much more likely to face than their younger counterparts.

Several students had faced financial difficulties as a result of being faced with extraordinary expenses or changes in their family circumstances against the background of living on a restricted income. For example, changes in their partner's employment or business situation and unexpected tax and property bills left several students with serious financial problems. One or two had made use of university hardship funds and some managed to solve – or at least to stall – these problems by recourse to other family members (conversely, one student pointed out that being a student meant that others in the household were restricted in claiming benefits and were consequently worse off). Several mentioned taking up the option of a student loan, although most did so unwillingly and only after exhausting other possibilities. For example, one described his financial situation in third year as 'borderline', having used his savings and obtained a Spearscross grant (available for students of his subject, environmental engineering). Looking ahead to fourth year, he projected:

> *'I don't believe that you should have to pay for your education, but I'll need to take out a loan'*

It was clear that financial problems posed a considerable challenge to the motivation of many of the students concerned, particularly those faced with severe or prolonged difficulties. Students often found such problems more difficult to cope with in the later stages of their courses, partly because financial problems tended to accumulate with each additional year spent budgeting on a grant – and, having entered higher education *via* SWAP, these students had all spent a year on bursary support prior to commencing higher education – and partly because the difficulties simply became more irksome the longer they went on.

Employment

Nineteen of the students – around four in ten – had undertaken term time work outwith their course of study at some point during the academic years on which the interviews were focused. Findings on this subject based on interviews conducted are similar in this and other respects. (This aspect has to be considered as the average number of interviews per female was greater than in the case of males: see Chapter 1.) In addition, one student had been studying on a day and block release basis in the hope that her qualifications would help to advance her career with her present employer.

Two of the nineteen had been involved in voluntary work; the others had been in paid employment. Women were more likely to work than men:

- 15 of the 33 female students had worked (45%)
- 4 of the 16 men had worked (25%).

Two of the women were continuing in jobs which they had held throughout SWAP and higher education and which they intended to continue on graduation (one was a midwife and the other worked as a newspaper sub-editor). Furthermore, the two voluntary workers were women. If this group of four is excluded from the above figures, the proportion of female students working falls to 33%.

The vast majority had undertaken work in order to help finance their studies. While this might alleviate financial difficulties, work could have an adverse impact on academic performance through eating into valuable study time. As with the demands of family commitments, students could be faced with a delicate balancing act in terms of work and study. For example, a student who had taken a driving job during his second year of study clearly described facing these conflicting demands:

'I initially took on too many hours but I've cut them down. I'm continually in a dilemma whether or not to do extra shifts. The money is tempting, but it takes time'

It would be wrong to give the impression, though, that undertaking paid work always served to overcome the financial problems experienced. Ten of the seventeen students who had undertaken paid employment still found themselves in financial difficulties.

■ Extent of impact on academic studies

In terms of the extent to which academic difficulties were experienced which arose from some aspect of students' personal circumstances, the following picture emerges:

- Over half of all students [51%] had experienced academic difficulties stemming from some aspect of their personal circumstances in the course of at least one of the academic years concerning which they were interviewed.
- Such difficulties were specified in the course of one third of the interviews conducted [34%].
- Women were more likely than men to experience academic problems as a result of the impact of personal circumstances: these were mentioned in the course of 39% of interviews with women as compared to 19% of interviews with men.
- Such problems were also more common among humanities than science students, but it is likely that the sex of the student is the underlying factor (most humanities students were female, most scientists male: the relative incidences for humanities and scientists were almost identical to those for males and females).

Detailed figures on this subject are presented in the following chapter, where academic problems in general are discussed.

This chapter has highlighted the impact of personal factors on former SWAP students. Considering that SWAP Access courses prioritise individuals with particular social and economic characteristics such as those who are unemployed or single parents it would not be unexpected that the levels of, for example, financial difficulties and health problems, present in this group would be greater than the student population at large. Thus it is likely that SWAP students are more vulnerable in respect of personal problems impinging on their academic studies.

5 Academic experiences

Summary

Students experience good and bad years of study. Just over half of the students reported having problems intrinsic to the academic content of their courses at some stage, while just over one third experienced difficulties as a result of some aspect of the operation of their course or institution. Women were more likely than men to experience the latter.

In relation to assessment, humanities students were much more likely to favour courses based on continuous assessment than science students who were evenly split between favouring courses based on continuous assessment and those predominantly using end of session/year examinations. Almost all of the students experienced examinations at one or more of the stages concerning which they were interviewed. In one respect science and humanities students differed in their preparation for such exams. Science students were more likely to organise and take part in study groups than were humanities students. Two thirds of students reported receiving help in preparing for exams from course tutors or lecturers. Almost all of the remaining third would have appreciated help with exam preparation. Thirteen of the forty seven students who reported sitting examinations failed at some point in the course of the years(s) concerning which they were interviewed.

All of the humanities students and eleven of the sixteen science students were required to submit essays as part of their course. Around half of the students reported receiving help in preparing essays. Those who did not receive help in preparing essays said they would have appreciated some help.

In some cases students were required to submit other work, such as lab reports, projects and dissertations for assessment. All but one of the science students and six in ten of the humanities students had to submit such work. Almost all of the students said that they received help or an offer of help from lecturers or tutors in preparing such work.

Introduction

Information on students' academic experiences were sought as a major strand in ascertaining whether SWAP courses were preparing students for the rigours of study in higher education institutions and, relatedly, in order to probe the issue of problems and their resolution, which had been identified as an area of interest for the research.

We start by reporting students' own views as to how their studies had gone, and go on to consider the nature and extent of academic problems experienced,

students' own views and preferences in respect of assessment practices, and students' experiences of preparing assessed work. This section concludes with a summary of progress in terms of the outcome of assessment.

Findings relate to the ninety eight interviews conducted with forty nine students in the course of phase two of the research (details of the composition of this group and the educational stages pertaining to the interviews conducted are given in Appendix 2). In terms of the areas of interest identified at the outset of phase two of the research, this chapter has a bearing on progress in higher education, and problems and their resolution.

Students' own views regarding their studies

Students were asked, at all stages of the research, to respond to a multi-choice question which sought an assessment as to how their studying had gone over the course of the previous academic year. They were then asked to give examples of the experiences which had led them to this choice, following which responses were categorised. Findings are illustrated in Table 5.1, which is based on the total number of interviews conducted over the course of phase 2, while Appendix 3 Chart 3 illustrates findings in respect of the 49 students on an interview by interview basis over the course of their studies.

Table 5.1 How students fared with their studies (on the basis of own assessments)

	Science	Humanities	ALL
Coped well	14	24	38
Had a few problems managed generally	7	27	34
Found some subjects particularly difficult	2	16	18
Found whole course difficult	3	4	7
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	26	71	97

NOTE: Information not available from one interview

Looking first at findings for the group as a whole, it emerges that the most popular response overall was 'coped well', this being reported in respect of well over a third of the academic years covered. However, looking at findings on a student by student basis (Appendix 5 Chart 3), it emerges that only one quarter of students interviewed [12/49] always responded with coped well', and that eight of these twelve students were interviewed only once (the remaining four students – two humanities and two science – had been interviewed on all three occasions). The emergent picture is therefore one of students having particular years when they coped well with their studies while in the course of others difficulties were experienced.

Around a third of responses fell into the category 'had a few problems but managed in general', with humanities students somewhat more likely than

science students to report this (38% of humanities interviews as compared to 27% of interviews in respect of science courses). Academic difficulties, either in relation to specific subjects [n=18] or, less frequently, the whole course [n=7] were acknowledged in around a quarter of all responses. Looking at responses on a student by student basis, it emerges that just over half of the humanities students [17; 52%] indicated at some point that they had found some subjects or the whole course difficult, as compared to around a third of science students [5;31%]. The disparity was particularly marked in respect of the category 'found some subjects particularly difficult'. While these findings may indicate a greater likelihood of perceived difficulties on the part of humanities students, they might simply be a consequence of the research design. In addition to limitations imposed by the small numbers involved, with fewer interviews conducted per student in the case of the science group (see introduction to this chapter for details) there was less chance for the general pattern of variation from year to year to assert itself and a greater likelihood for the single most common response i.e. 'coped well' to prevail.

■ Nature of academic problems experienced

The opportunity for academic problems to be discussed arose at several points in the interviews. Firstly, they were touched on in the discussion of students' assessment as to how their studying had gone, as discussed above. Secondly, difficulties might be mentioned when discussing assessed work (as reported below), although this was not a systematic component of the questioning on this subject. In order to be sure that all academic difficulties were identified, students were also asked if they had experienced any additional problems, and were asked to provide information on any help received in connection with such problems. Table 5.2 summarises findings from all of the relevant areas of interviews to produce an overview of the source and nature of academic difficulties on the basis of:

- *Students* – whether or not students mentioned each type of difficulty at some stage/no difficulty at some stage
- *Interviews* – how often such difficulties arose in the course of the ninety eight interviews conducted.

Table 5.2 Academic problems

Source/Nature	Students [n=49)		Interviews [n = 98]	
	No.	%	No.	%
Personal Circumstances	25	51	33	34
Course Work	26	53	31	32
Institutional Structure	17	35	22	22
Other	9	18	10	10
None	19	39	24	24

Findings are also illustrated, on a student by student basis (showing the humanities/science and male/female split), in Appendix 5 Chart 4.

Problems arising from aspects of the students' personal circumstances have been fully discussed in the previous chapter. Findings in respect of difficulties arising from other sources can be summarised as follows.

Course work

Just over half of the students interviewed had experienced difficulties intrinsic to the academic content of their course work at some time, and such problems had emerged in the course of almost one third of the academic years researched. In terms of the relative incidence between science and humanities courses, comparisons are best made on the basis of third year statistics, which show that scientists reported a much higher incidence of difficulties intrinsic to course work [6/11 students; 55%] than humanities students [6/25; 24%]. Students reported a broad range of problems, including some subjects being too difficult or uninteresting, some subjects making greater demand on student time than others, and not receiving enough feedback from departments on assessments.

Institutional structure

Just over one third of students experienced difficulties arising from some aspect of the operation of their course or institution. Women were much more likely than men to encounter such problems [they arose in the course of 27% of the academic years reported by women, as compared to 11% of those reported by men].

No problems

While around four in ten students had experienced at least one academic year free of problems, only five students indicated no academic problems at any stage and it is notable that four of these students were interviewed on only one occasion. In line with the information on students' own assessments of their academic experience, the pattern which emerges is one of students having particular years when they coped well and while others were more problematic.

■ Students' views regarding assessment

Interviewees were asked for their views on course grades based on assessment of work throughout the course and on grades based on assessment by means of end of year examinations, and were then asked to state their preference in terms of the contribution of examinations and continuous assessment to assessment overall. All students interviewed gave their views on this subject at some point. The analysis which follows is based on responses given following completion of third year when available, otherwise responses from an earlier stage are considered.

The following table illustrates findings arising when students were asked to rate their attitudes to:

- a course grade based largely on assessment of work throughout the year
- a course grade based largely on end of year or end of session examinations.

Table 5.3 Attitudes to course grades based on examinations/course work

Attitude	Largely Course Work			Largely End of Year Examination		
	Science	Hum'ties	ALL	Science	Hum'ties	ALL
Very Much Preferred	4	17	21	5	0	5
Quite Preferred	4	11	15	4	15	19
Not Preferred	7	5	12	6	18	24
Don't Know	1	0	1	1	0	1
TOTAL	16	33	49	16	33	49

A clear difference between humanities and science students emerges here. Findings in respect of science students were somewhat contradictory and inconclusive, as these students, in aggregate, indicated almost identical attitudes with respect to the two methods of grading courses. Humanities students, on the other hand, were clearly more likely to favour a grade largely based on the assessment of course work throughout the year, with nearly half saying that they very much preferred such an approach and none indicating this attitude to predominantly examination based grades.

Asked to justify their views, the following emerged as the perceived strengths and weaknesses of these respective methods of assessment (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1

Students' perceptions of assessment based on course work

Positive Features

- Provides feedback to the student on progress throughout the year
- Gives a better overall view of a student's capabilities: a healthier perspective
- Allows assessed work to be produced in a more relaxed atmosphere
- Comparable to the world of work in that one could seek help from a manual or colleague.

Negative Features

- Can produce continuous pressure and thus detract from enjoyment of the course
- Can be seen as an easy option and thus devalue the qualification
- Work can be plagiarised
- Produces difficulties for those whose ability to study throughout the year is adversely affected by ill health or family commitments
- Work cannot be resubmitted in the same way that an examination can be re-taken
- Students can forget about elements of the course once they have been assessed.

Students' perceptions of end of term examinations

Positive Features

- Short: gets the assessment over with quickly
- Can lend credibility to the qualification as examinations are an esteemed method of assessment
- Plagiarism unlikely
- Sharpens the wits and focuses the mind; can produce a 'buzz' and provide feelings of self-satisfaction and achievement
- Comparable to the world of work in terms of pressure on the time available to complete a task
- Experience of revision at the year's end can help with retention of information in the longer term.

Negative Features

- Measures performance on one day only; as such can be a poor guide to students' knowledge and capabilities
- Simply tests memory: can 'swot' for exam then forget it all
- Can produce nervousness and feelings of panic
- Can mar enjoyment of the subject through the need to work specifically for the examination.

The diversity and divergence of views expressed in part reflects personal preference, but also arises from varying interpretations as to the practice and procedure involved in producing a course grade based on assessment of work throughout the year. This could be seen as simply giving the work produced for assessment in the course of the year – essays, lab. reports projects etc – a greater weighting in terms of its contribution to overall assessment of the academic year. As one student observed, this could result in the production of better quality work:

> *'You could score 90 from 100 for an assignment yet it hardly counted. Continuous assessment would encourage you to produce a better assignment'*

Alternatively, a course grade based largely on assessment of work produced throughout the year might be seen as entailing that more such work be produced; not surprisingly, some concerns were expressed about such a prospect.

Students were then read a short list of statements representing assessment possibilities and were asked to indicate their preference. Results are presented in Table 5.4 below.

Table 5.4 Balance of assessment types preferred

	Science	Humanities	ALL
Continuous assessment only	3	7	10
Mainly continuous assessment	1	10	11
An equal mixture of the two	8	14	22
Mainly end of term assessment	2	2	4
End of term assessment only	2	0	2
TOTAL	16	33	49

The humanities students tendency to favour continuous assessment again emerges, with seventeen preferring a course based only or mainly on assessment of work throughout the year and only two replying that they preferred mainly end of year assessment. One humanities student, who had been assessed by continuous assessment only in her third year, succinctly stated the generally occurring view as follows:

> *'Continuous assessment is fairer because some people have exam nerves ... Continuous assessment is learning from what you've done in the past, learning to plan your learning, an exam is just a big rush'*

However, it is of note that fourteen (42%) of the humanities students indicated that they would prefer assessment based on an equal mixture of continuous and end of term assessment.

Results in respect of science students show a wider spread of views; four (one quarter) favoured courses based mainly or entirely around continuous assessment and the same number favoured end of term assessment; half said they would wish both elements to be present and to have equal weight.

Asked to explain their preferences, varying interpretations of the term 'continuous assessment' came into play. Most students who stated a preference for such assessment seemed to interpret this as involving essay work prepared at home or in the library, or activities such as laboratory work undertaken on their courses throughout the academic year. They wished that the assessment of such work played a greater part in their overall assessment than an end of term examination, possibly allowing for exemption from examination if the essays *etc.* were of a sufficiently high standard. Exemptions could be perceived as vital to time management for mature students with considerable demands outwith the academic sphere, and as such could influence subject choices:

> *'for mature students with families, it is important to choose subjects carefully so that you can have the possibility of exemptions'*

However, some saw continuous assessment as involving a great deal of assessed work. Others considered that the assessment might take the form of frequent exams, a procedure which would involve most of the negative features of an end of term examination, exacerbated by more frequently occurrence. It is interesting to note that one science student remarked in this context that she had found the continuous assessment used to evaluate performance on Access more arduous than the predominantly end of term assessment of her higher education course for this very reason. She had missed part of the third and final year of her course due to serious illness on the part of her mother and later observed:

> *'I found Access very heavy going with continuous assessment, and wouldn't have enjoyed an exam every month. Because of circumstances in the family, I might have failed had the course in [higher education] involved continuous assessment'*

Another criticised the continuous assessment procedure she had experienced on Access as leading to failure to retain course material in the longer term:

> *'I had weekly continuous assessment on Access and found that I forgot about the course content once the assessment was over. With an exam at the end of term you have to study so it sticks in your memory'*

■ Students' experiences of assessed work

Particular attention was paid to gathering information concerning the types of assessment which students were called upon to undertake. Students were asked in detail about their experience of examinations, essays, and other assessed work at the first two rounds of interviews, with questions regarding study methods, the nature of any help and support received from lecturers and tutors, how effective this help was, and whether or not help had been required but not provided. It was not felt necessary to repeat the exercise a third time at the final

stage, and students were simply asked whether their course had included examinations and, if so, how they had fared.

One question in particular was paramount here: since many Access courses do not utilise exam-based assessment, did such courses adequately prepare these students to face the exam based assessment procedures which predominate in higher education?

Examinations

Examinations tended to feature prominently in course assessment, although not always on an annual basis. A few students had undertaken courses which involved stages judged by means of assessed course work throughout the year, others had the possibility of gaining exemptions from examinations in the first and second years if course work was of a sufficiently high standard (several students had gained such exemptions).

All but two of the 49 students experienced exams at one or more of the stages concerning which they were interviewed and were asked in detail about their experiences in this regard.

Study methods

Students adopted a wide range of exam techniques including the selection of particular areas or topics to revise, reading over past papers to familiarise themselves with the format and nature of questions to expect, and condensing down notes into key terms and phrases. However, in one particular respect, variation emerged between science and humanities students in relation to exam preparation: science students were more likely to organise study groups than were humanities students. As one student observed concerning his third and final year on a quantity surveying course:

> *'I confer with other students. Teamwork is the way to make it easier. We put ourselves into groups – there is always someone who knows something about a subject'*

Similarly, a third year engineering student stressed the value of group preparation as a means of cutting down the workload for the individual:

> *'We split up work between students as the volume is so great; it's the only way to do it. There is a lot of team work as I try to keep on top of the continuous assessment and at the same time study for exams'*

This difference may be linked to the nature of the courses and the material which science students study, where single correct answers predominate and exam papers tend to cover the full range of course work, and where classes of students follow the same timetable, allowing for study groups to be organised at mutually suitable times.

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Perceived need for change in respect of exam preparation strategy

Students were asked in the course of their first and second round interviews whether or not they would make any changes to their preparation strategy if sitting examinations the following year. Thirty of the 47 students who had sat exams (64%) replied in the affirmative on one or both occasions. There was some indication that students did develop more effective preparation strategies as time went on: exactly two thirds of those interviewed on completion of second year indicated that they would wish to make a change, but on completion of third year the proportion wishing to make a change had fallen to 42%. The theme of learning to study also emerges from one of the few first year interviews conducted in the course of phase 2. The student concerned had bought a book on the subject of exam preparation after his first year experience, observing:

> *'I think I was looking at too much material, but I felt that was what I had to do since I hadn't sat an exam in twelve years'*

Most of those who indicated that they would change their preparation methods mentioned beginning aspects of their preparation earlier and avoiding cramming at a late stage. Several felt that they would benefit from more group study, including one who noted this as particularly beneficial if it involved other former Access students:

> *'I would like to find time to discuss work with other students. I think that other Access students who work together benefit from this'*

One student hoped to improve on her second year exam preparation by taking advantage of a class on exam techniques in third year: this was the only occasion on which the availability of such a class was mentioned.

Finally, others referred to the need for a change of attitude rather than strategy, either feeling that they should try harder or, conversely, that they had suffered badly from examination nerves and hoped to be able to adopt a calmer approach in future.

Support and guidance in preparing for examinations

Asked if lecturers and/or tutors had provided any help in relation to preparation for examinations, responses of the 33 third year students who had sat exams were as follows:

- 22 replied that they had received some help
- 11 replied that they had received no help at all.

Thus two-thirds had received help. This generally took the form of revision seminars or tutorials, suggestions for relevant areas to prepare and revise, and suitable references to consult. Almost all of those who had not received preparatory help for examinations [9/11] said that they would have appreciated help with exam preparation.

Looking at expressed needs for help over the course of the two rounds of interviews in which this area was explored, it emerges that twenty of the 47

students who had exam experience in the course of the academic years in question (43%) had some criticism about the nature and/or extent of the help received in relation to exam preparation (this figure includes those who were concerned that they had received no help at all).

Dissatisfaction with support: science vs humanities students

When this information is analysed in terms of differences between science and humanities courses, an interesting but ultimately inconclusive picture emerges. The humanities students were more likely to have voiced criticisms concerning help than were the scientists – half of the humanities students questioned about help [16/32] expressed criticism at some stage, as compared to around a quarter of the scientists [4/15]. Similarly, looking at the picture with respect to interviews conducted, criticisms of help and support in relation to exam preparation were expressed in the course of four of the relevant science interviews [17%] (*i.e.* excluding interviews concerning academic years which had not involved exams) and twenty of the relevant humanities interviews [29%]. However, when the comparison is made on the basis of third year experience alone, the incidence of dissatisfaction among the two groups was equal, at just over one third [36%]. The reason why the overall incidence was higher among humanities students is that seven students who were satisfied with the situation in respect of help provided in third year had been critical of the situation in second year; on the other hand, because of the way the research sample was selected and the phase 2 interview programme structured, few science students were interviewed concerning their second year experiences – all of the science students who expressed criticism were third year students. Further investigation would be required in order to ascertain whether these findings indicate that there is a higher incidence of unmet need for help in preparing for exams among former SWAP students studying humanities than among their counterparts studying science, or that the incidence of unmet need for help decreases as students progress from year to year, becoming more familiar with examination procedure and practice. (There is, of course, the possibility that this is a chance finding: numbers are small, particularly in the case of science.) Humanities students were slightly more likely to express unmet need for help in second year – 35% – than third year – 32%.

Examinations on humanities courses usually take the form of essay type questions, but with a relatively short time available in which to structure the response. As such, students who are able to produce essays quickly and with a minimum of revision tend to fare best. Against this background, one second year English student observed that, whereas the conclusions of her essays submitted throughout the year had been strong, at exam time this important element suffered because of time pressures. She intended to seek help with this, noting:

> *'I need to be trained in how to write a good essay in 45 minutes – how to think it out and structure it in a short amount of time. Next year I plan to ask the tutor to help me do that and by the time I do my finals, I'll hopefully be trained'*

Criticisms of help received; nature of additional help required

In general terms, both those who criticised the nature of the help received, and those who did not receive help but wished for assistance, tended to desire guidance regarding the scope of the exam and pointers and tips on ways to approach answering exam questions, some of which could be perceived as obtuse or even unrelated to the topics studied. Several of these students pointed out that they were simply unfamiliar with the exam system and required orientation. As previously discussed, many SWAP courses do not feature exams. Furthermore, some of the students had little or no exam experience from any source; for example, one MA student observed that, other than the old 'eleven-plus', she had *never* sat an exam prior to starting her university course. Against this background, the following comment – from a second year English student – was fairly typical:

> *'Direction would have helped – like being told how you have to approach it to get the most out of it ... It would be very helpful if they had a session about your particular situation and problems'*

Thus, as well as provision of group revision, availability of lecturers and tutors to respond to specific difficulties on an individual basis was welcomed. One chemistry student had found deficiencies in both respects; he would have found more time devoted to tutorials beneficial, and remarked regarding staff availability:

> *'trying to get extra help is difficult because staff are off doing research or otherwise not there'*

Such problems were not confined to science courses – for example, almost identical criticisms were voiced by a third year law student.

Less typical was the experience of the second year politics student who lacked even basic information on the marking system in terms of the proportion of the final mark derived from course work and from exams. In this situation, she did not know when sitting an exam the mark required to pass the course. Furthermore, while several students mentioned use of past papers in preparation, this student took this idea a stage further, noting that if (anonymous) marked examples of responses could be provided then she would have a clearer idea of the standard required.

Essays

As would be expected, humanities courses were more likely than science courses to require that students produce essays. For example, all of the humanities students interviewed reported having been required to submit essays for assessment at some stage, while only eleven of the sixteen science students were required to produce essays in the course of at least one of the years focused on at interview rounds one and two, respectively.

Essay preparation methods

Students who were required to submit essays were asked how they generally went about preparing an essay. While students adopted a range of techniques, several core activities emerged. These were: reading the background material, making notes, and planning some kind of outline. Generally this process appeared to happen over a few days although some students said that on occasion they had mulled over particular essays for a few weeks while others had begun the process the night before the submission date. Most commonly students said they would produce two or three drafts of an essay before the final version. A sizeable number of the students mentioned the use of word processing, which by nature is likely to result in a more incremental approach to producing the final version.

Support and guidance in preparing essays

Asked if lecturers and/or tutors had provided any help in relation to essay preparation, responses of the 31 third year students who had been required to submit essays for assessment were as follows:

- 14 replied that they had received some help
- 2 replied that help had been available but not used
- 15 replied that they had received no help at all.

Thus around half had received help. Typically this took the form of receiving suggestions for suitable references and areas to include in the essay, guidelines on structure and general discussion. All of those who had not received help in preparing third year essays indicated that they would have appreciated some guidance.

Looking at expressed needs for help over the course of the two rounds of interviews in which this area was explored, it emerges that 17 of the 44 students who had been required to submit essays for assessment (43%) had criticisms about the nature or extent of the help received. This figure includes those who felt that the efficacy of help varied from tutor to tutor, or that they would have liked more of their lecturers or tutors to provide assistance in relation to the preparation of essays.

Humanities students

Among humanities students, criticism of the situation in respect of help in relation to essay preparation was slightly more likely to arise in third year than in second year, with 37.5% of third year students and 31% of second year students who were required to submit essays expressing dissatisfaction. Thirteen humanities students expressed dissatisfaction at some stage, referring to the need for general guidance on essay preparation, help in selecting appropriate texts to review, and help in identifying the salient points to draw from these texts.

Among second year humanities students, a wish for tutors to provide guidance regarding 'what they are looking for' was repeatedly mentioned. In some cases this simply reflected a perceived need for general guidance. More often, however, this was linked – implicitly or explicitly – to the perception that essay requirements tended to vary from tutor to tutor. For example, the following remarks are taken from interviews with MA students on completion of second year. All said that they had not received guidance in relation to essay preparation and that they would have appreciated some assistance; they were then asked to describe the sort of help which would have been appropriate.

'Some tutors don't make it explicit what they're looking for. Sometimes it takes a whole year to get to know what a particular tutor expects'

'It all depends on your tutor. Last year I had a tutor who appreciated what I did. This year my tutor was more theoretical and my work wasn't appreciated. I would have had higher marks if he'd told me exactly what to do'

'They could give ideas on styles of writing and help in summarising the main points. Criticism after the essay is marked is helpful. Better still, it would be nice to know beforehand what a particular lecturer is looking for'

The theme of variation also emerged in the remarks of several students who noted that some tutors and lecturers offered help while others did not, or that the efficacy of the help provided varied from tutor to tutor.

Difficulties concerning access to appropriate preparatory material emerged from time to time. In this connection, one student criticised the reading list which had been provided, as many of the books suggested proved to be out of print.

Science students

While the number of science students required to submit essays was too small to make year on year comparisons viable, there were clear signs from this group that support and guidance in relation to preparation for essay writing had been lacking. Four of the eight science students who had been required to write essays as part of their third year course had marked criticisms of the nature or extent of help offered and expressed a need for general guidance on essay preparation, practice in essay writing, and feedback on performance. One student had even been party to a letter of complaint concerning lack of feedback:

'The situation was very disappointing. We were required to submit three essays but never got reports back – so it wasn't a learning process'

Another student, noting that she had not been required to write an essay for twenty years, observed:

'Even though they come from a science background, they should give us some guidance on how to write an essay. For example, you can use quotes – I didn't know that'

Later in third year, having decided against a teaching career, she was with some relief able to give up the part of her course which had included the preparation of essays.

One student's difficulties derived from her somewhat anomalous position studying for a BSc in Sociology, a subject more commonly encountered under the aegis of an arts degree. She would have appreciated guidance on the preparation of essays, observing that tutorials had not been provided for BSc students:

'There was no real offer of help. I was the only mature student, and felt isolated'

Finally, problems stemming from access to preparatory material again emerged, in this case stemming from shortage: one student complained that, with 400 students on the course all trying to get access to one book via a 'short loan' facility, there was a strong temptation to pay the financial penalty incurred by keeping the book for a longer period.

Other assessed work

This heading covers work such as lab reports, projects, and dissertations. All but one of the science students had been required to submit other forms of work for assessment at some point in the course of the years focused on at interview rounds one and two, as compared to around six in ten of the humanities students [20/33]. (Because scrutiny of assessed work was not repeated at round three, the study methods employed and help received in relation to the dissertations completed by humanities students, most of whom were in their honours year in the academic year in question, were not investigated. However, any particular difficulties experienced in relation to this were covered by questions concerning academic problems, which were repeated at all stages. Findings emerging from this area are discussed later in this section.)

Preparation of other assessed work

Group work tended to feature here, sometimes as organised by the students' themselves (again, mainly science students), and sometimes as an intrinsic element of the assessed work involved (in both humanities and science courses). As in preparation for examinations, voluntarily organised study groups were felt to be beneficial; for example, a third year engineering student discussed the preparation of lab reports and technical work as follows:

'Do I confer? Very much so – someone usually has an idea on it or has done that type of work before: this cuts down on workload'

On the other hand, while the requirement to produce of assessed work on a group basis could work well:

'We formed our own groups of four, choosing people who lived close by each other. My group got on well, and relied on each other's strengths.' (3rd year community education student, discussing group assignments and presentations)

such team work could also pose problems. For example, one student who had been part of a group of three preparing a social history project faced difficulties when one of the group was forced to drop out, leaving those remaining short of material on which to base the work. Another had been part of a group of four preparing an assessed project as part of his third year engineering course, and had found two of his three co-workers to be less keen and hardworking than himself, thus depressing his assessment.

The need to produce work in keeping with the preferences of the particular staff involved was mentioned, but much less frequently than in respect of essays. For example:

> *'I try to find out what the lecturer wants – this varies enormously, in relation to both layout and content' (3rd year engineering student, discussing the preparation of lab reports)*

Support and guidance in the preparation of other assessed work

Asked if lecturers and/or tutors had provided any help in relation to the preparation of other forms of assessed work, responses of the nineteen third year students concerned were as follows:

- 15 replied that they had received some help
- 2 replied that help had been available but not used
- 2 replied that they had received no help at all.

Thus almost all had received help or the offer of help. Students reported a range of different forms of help, partly dependent on the type of work undertaken. Science and humanities students with large projects to undertake were often allocated a supervisor who checked on progress and made suggestions for developing and continuing the work. Several of the students mentioned guidance in selecting reference material and one made specific reference to lab sessions designed to aid computer literacy.

Satisfaction with the help received was high in comparison to expressed needs in relation to examinations and essays. Of the 35 students required to submit other forms of assessed work at some stage in the course of the years in question, only eight – around a quarter (5/20 humanities students and 3/15 scientists) – had criticisms of the nature or extent of the help offered.

■ Outcome of assessment

Thirteen students, representing just over a quarter of the 47 who had sat examinations, had experienced exam failure at some point in the course of the year(s) concerning which they were interviewed. Appendix 4 provides information on this group on a student by student basis, covering the various subjects considered above i.e. how the students had found the course, the nature of any problems experienced, assistance from tutors and lecturers in respect of exam preparation, and preparation strategies. It should be stressed that this information relates to exam failures occurring in the course of the academic

years relevant to phase 2 of the research, and will not include failures at earlier stages. For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, three students are known to have dropped out of their higher education courses during phase 1 of the research following exam failure. In addition, a young student of Ophthalmology who was interviewed at the first round of phase 2 had just passed all of her first year exams, having previously failed first year and taken a year out of higher education in order to save the money necessary to fund herself for a second attempt, no grant being available in these circumstances.

In relation to the group of thirteen students who experienced exam failure in the course of phase 2, the following points emerge:

- In the vast majority of cases [11/13], the exam failure made no lasting impact on the student's subsequent academic career. Eight students passed resits and were followed to graduation; a further three passed their resits but subsequently lost contact with the research. It would appear that only one of this group dropped the subject concerned, and she said that she had made this decision prior to learning of her exam failure.
- Two of the above exam failures were directly due to adverse personal circumstances – a combination of poor personal health and having to cope with parents' illnesses in both cases. In addition, two others felt that personal circumstances had played a part: one had found difficulty finding time for work and family commitments and the other felt that his continuing financial difficulties had affected his motivation.
- One of the thirteen students remained an undergraduate at the final stage of the research. She had found her course a considerable struggle. This was largely as a result of adverse personal circumstances, but she also experienced academic difficulties with the mathematical component of psychology and changed tack within her course accordingly. She spoke highly of the help received from staff in relation to exam preparation.
- One student did not complete his course. Unfortunately the circumstances pertaining are unclear. The exam failures occurred in second year, and it would appear that he remained in higher education at the outset of the following academic year – this could mean that he passed the resits and progressed to third year; alternatively, it might indicate a repeat of second year – but dropped out before the year's end. When interviewed concerning his second year experiences, he indicated no academic problems and felt no need for change in respect of study methods nor had he criticisms of the help received from tutors and lecturers.

In addition, two students passed exams but failed to achieve the necessary grades to progress to honours in the desired subjects (see cases 31 and 85, Table VII, Appendix 3) and one student, having entered junior honours and passed her third year exams, fell foul of a somewhat anachronistic system whereby the mark

attained was deemed insufficient for honours, nor was there provision for resits – she was, however, able to graduate with an 'advanced ordinary' degree which proved acceptable for entry to a post graduate course of study (case 71, Table VII, Appendix 3).

Many of the points raised here by the former SWAP students concerning studying and assessment could easily be true of other groups of students. For example, many higher education students would see the need for honing their examination and essay preparation techniques. Certainly the students experiences of departmental support or its lack in examination and essay preparation are likely to be representative of said departments approaches to student support in general. Discussion of higher education institutions' awareness of SWAP students is raised in more detail in Chapter 7.

6 Goals and guidance in higher education

Summary

A majority of the SWAP students sought advice at some point during the academic years surveyed in this study. In the main, advice was sought during the early stages of their courses when topic choices were more open.

Three students changed courses from that originally embarked on and in only one instance was such change solely the result of academic factors. In the other cases course change decisions involved a combination of personal, career and academic factors. However, nine students made a clear change of direction in terms of their chosen subjects. Such changes were generally made for positive reasons, for example reflecting a developing interest in particular topics, or changed career plans.

Most students [71%] started out with some form of career plan, even if highly general. As with subject choices, career plans tended to be modified for positive reasons. However, in a few instances, changed career plans were the result of poor academic performance or the difficulty of reconciling personal circumstances with the demands of the related higher education course.

Introduction

Students embarking on a course of higher education face some subjects for the first time and approach familiar subjects with a different perspective from that encountered in either school or further education. In addition, many new activities and interest groups are offered to take up leisure time. In these and other ways, higher education institutions invite students to widen their experiences. It is therefore likely that many students will change their subject preferences and alter initial career plans in the light of such experiences.

This section starts with a general overview in respect of the advice sought by students regarding their courses and subjects. It goes on to focus on course and subject changes and on students' decisions as to whether or not to study to honours level, with information on advice sought in relation to these choices and on any related changes of career plan. In particular, changes resulting from the impact of personal circumstances or academic problems are highlighted. Finally, those changes of career plan not covered in the discussion of course and subject changes are summarised.

The reference numbers used to identify particular students in this section correspond to those used in the summary case histories (Appendix 3) and,

where relevant, the information on students who experienced exam failure (Appendix 4), allowing cross reference for those who wish further details of circumstances.

Advice

Interviewees were asked if they had sought any advice regarding what they were doing 'this year' i.e. the academic year on which the rest of the interview focused. The first round of interviews were mostly conducted over the summer recess, and so some students answered speculatively (interview rounds two and three were conducted at a later stage, when students had returned to university).

- 31 [63%] had sought advice at some time, or planned to do so at time of interview.
- Students were more likely to seek advice in early stages of course, when choices more open.
- Two-thirds of humanities students had sought advice, as compared to just over half of the scientists; however, this difference probably arises because most science students were not interviewed in phase two before completion of third year.

Advice will be considered in respect of the specific groups considered below.

Changes of course

Three students had made a change from the course originally embarked on. Only one of these changes was prompted by purely academic factors; this occurred when a student made the change from an MA course on which she had intended to specialise in psychology to studying for a BSc in sociology, following second year results which 'did not engender confidence' (Appendix 3 case 12, table VII). Prior to making the change, she had consulted with her director of studies regarding the respective workloads which would be involved, particularly the amount of reading required, and had also spoken to career's guidance staff. She had no particular career plans, and so the change made no impact in this respect.

Conflict between the demands of child care and the structure of the course played a part in each of the other two changes, both of which took place following first year (i.e. at the close of phase 1 of the research) and entailed a change of career plan. One student had intended to become a teacher and began a BEd Tech course, but changed to a BA in Community Education following first year, aiming to work in community education (in this she was successful; see Appendix 3 case 83, table VII). The other student completed first year of a BSc course in Prosthetics and Orthotics before changing to a BA course in Industrial Relations. This was the most major of the three course changes, and the only one which required the student concerned to start afresh. Her career goals changed to aiming for administration and personnel work, preserving her interest in working with people (see Appendix 3 case 69, table VIII).

In addition, one student (see Appendix 3 case 02, Table VIII) changed to another higher education institution in order to allow her to specialise in sociology, which was not possible on the Social Science course which she had originally embarked on.

■ Ordinary vs Honours Degrees

As discussed in Chapter 2, thirteen students graduated with ordinary degrees while twenty four took honours (the remaining students either obtained some other qualification, remained undergraduates on completion of the research, or lost contact with the research prior to graduation). Some had always intended an ordinary degree, however, eight of the thirteen had considered or would have preferred to go on to honours. As discussed in part 2 above, three of these students did not attain a high enough mark to progress to honours in the desired subject. In a further three instances, no information is available regarding the reasons for this decision. Details of the remaining two cases are as follows:

- Case 39: This student decided to graduate after third year because, as stress tended to exacerbate a health problem, she was concerned about the possible impact of a further year of examinations and assessed work.
- Case 21: This student decided to graduate with an ordinary degree in law and to go on to take a post graduate Diploma in Legal Practice. However, she failed to obtain funding for this course and was therefore unable to seek employment as a lawyer. She felt that she had been misadvised regarding the wisdom of graduating with an ordinary degree.

Details of all students who graduated with ordinary degrees are presented in Table VII of the case histories (Appendix 3).

■ Subject changes

Students in Higher Education Institutions change subjects for a wide variety of reasons. Some course are designed to allow for flexibility in subject choice with students admitted to particular faculties rather than departments, other are more focused from the start. In general, humanities and social science students can normally select and change subjects more readily than students in science and engineering departments.

Nine of the students had made a clear change of direction in terms of the subjects chosen. Most did so for positive reasons, having developed an interest in a particular area or changed their preferences in terms of career plans. In only three instances did students say they had changed subjects as a result of experiencing difficulties with the subject or their workload.

- Case 29 (Appendix 3 Table VII): This student did not attain sufficiently high marks to qualify for honours in her preferred subject, psychology. She therefore decided to study sociology as she enjoyed it and wanted an honours degree. She consulted with her Director of Studies concerning this change, which necessitated a change of career plan as she had originally intended to work as a psychologist. She developed an interest in mental health and art therapy, and when last contacted had decided that her real preference would be to become an artist.
- Case 75 (Appendix 3 Table V):This student had difficulties with the mathematics involved in the statistical component of psychology and experienced exam failure as a result. She sought advice on subjects from her adviser of studies before changing tack within her course to focus on other subjects and modifying her career goals from clinical psychology to working in a caring profession such as social work. She remained an undergraduate on completion of the research, intending to graduate with an ordinary degree.
- Case 78 (Appendix 3 Table IVb): This student had intended joint honours in German and politics but following difficulties with German in second year, when she failed the German Language exam decided to drop German and take single honours in politics instead. Workload considerations were paramount in this decision, which was taken after obtaining course related advice from a lecturer. She had no particular career plans.

Career plans

At the outset of their SWAP studies students were asked about any career plans which they had. At each subsequent interview stage students were asked whether these plans had altered and if so why. Table 6.1 gives an overview of students' status with regard to original career plans and whether these remained unchanged or were subsequently modified.

Table 6.1 – Students' career plans and revisions

Career Plans	Number of students
Specific plan, substantially unchanged	11
General plans, substantially unchanged	8
Modified plan, revised priorities	7
Considerably changed plans	9
No plans at outset, plans developed later	6
No plans	8
TOTAL	49

Nineteen students (39%) had retained their original plans while sixteen (33%) had either modified their plans to some extent or considerably change their plans. The remaining fourteen (29%) started out without any career plan in mind.

The circumstances behind the sixteen instances of changed or modified career plans can be summarised as follows:

- Four reflected changes in subject preferences for study, or growing interest in the subject studied.
- Three were intended to improve job opportunities.
- Three reflected difficulties arising from family circumstances in respect of the course of study originally intended.
- Two were necessitated by failure to obtain a place on the relevant post-graduate vocational course.
- Two were necessitated by poor academic performance in respect of the necessary subject.
- Two simply reflected a voluntary change of view regarding career plans.

Included in the above are seven cases where the change was largely forced, whether by personal circumstances, academic performance, failure to obtain a place on the relevant post graduate course, or failure to obtain work in the field of choice following graduation. The circumstances pertaining to five of these seven cases have been summarised above (Appendix 3 cases 21, 29, 69, 75, 83). The sixth concerned a student whose first choice of career was teaching but who, having failed to obtain a place on a teacher training course, went on to study for an MSc in Information and Administrative Management (case 05). In addition, one other student decided against teacher training, in view of family commitments. However, this decision was made easier as she had the offer of alternative employment (as a GP fundholding manager) prior to graduation (case 09). The seventh student had hoped to work in the field of his degree, geology, but having failed to find work a year after graduation began a course in Information Technology in the hope of finding employment in this sector (case 62). As many of the students were last in touch with the research fairly soon after graduation, it is quite possible that others may find themselves in a similar position as time goes on. (Information on outcomes following graduation is provided in Chapter 3.)

7 SWAP as preparation for higher education

Summary

Students were generally very positive about their SWAP experiences and how it had prepared them for higher education; many students specified no drawbacks at all. Responses including, building confidence, having supportive tutors/lecturers and developing study skills – underline the practical efficacy of the main aims of SWAP courses.

Students identified other less formal, though perhaps just as important, outcomes of SWAP. Sharing the experience of access with other mature students and building up a support network of fellow students (which often survived into and through higher education courses) were seen as beneficial in tackling the potential isolation that many mature students face in higher education.

All of the SWAP students who went on to higher education faced examinations at some stage. Most commonly students criticised SWAP for its lack of examination based assessment. However, negative comments were generally seen as areas for improving an otherwise good course.

There was some evidence from a few of the science students that there were specific gaps in their SWAP courses in relation to preparing one for mathematics in higher education. A few others also mentioned their lack of lab experience when entering higher education.

The majority of students responding (11 out of 18) said that the Higher Education establishment at which they studied did not acknowledge in any way that they had been an access student although one student indicated that the department had a member of staff responsible for monitoring access students.

This chapter summarises the retrospective views of SWAP students at the end of their higher education in relation to entry into higher education and the extent to which SWAP provided suitable preparations. We conclude with some general observations on the success of SWAP and how it related to models of learning and teaching in education.

Introduction

Higher education courses are not only diverse in terms of assessment but also in the kind of knowledge that is valued. Abstract, theoretical knowledge predominates in some courses while applied practical knowledge is typical of others. With such diverse higher education provision, the demands on access

courses to prepare students effectively are heavy. Students who eventually succeed in their higher education programme, acknowledge the vital part SWAP played in their academic development. There seems however to be a mismatch between the demands of higher education and the resources available to support students at the level possible in SWAP.

As previously discussed, the learning environment and approach to assessment found on SWAP courses tends to vary from that adopted in institutions of higher education. The SWAP approach is intended to boost the confidence of participants through a supportive environment with an incremental approach to learning, in the hope that increasing students' confidence in their own learning abilities as developed through small group learning situations in such a context will help them to cope with the potentially less congenial learning environments in higher education. Against this background, there is no doubt that at least some of the former SWAP students studied experienced the ethos of their higher education institutions as an alien environment. For example, asked about assistance provided in connection with exam preparation, one woman in her mid-forties began by observing:

> *'I'm at a loss competing with nineteen year olds. The last exam I took was the 11 plus in 1958. Help isn't forthcoming, especially with male tutors. They are more keen on young male undergraduates and have more time for them than middle-aged females'*

Is the SWAP approach an appropriate and effective strategy for preparing mature students to deal with such learning environments? Students were asked several questions directly related to this issue. At the final round of interviews, respondents were asked about any ways in which their higher education institutions had taken cognisance of their status as former SWAP students, while at both the final and penultimate rounds students were asked to retrospectively assess SWAP as preparation for higher education. This chapter will primarily discuss findings arising from responses to these questions. However, evaluation of SWAP is also implicit in findings presented earlier in this report. In particular, the discussion regarding how the students fared academically (Chapter 3, section 2) is directly relevant to the question: had SWAP prepared these students for the studies and assessments which they subsequently faced? The discussion in this chapter will therefore also draw on these earlier findings in considering the issue of the strengths and weaknesses of the SWAP scheme.

Are higher education institutions aware of SWAP students?

Many of the cohort students made positive comments concerning the nature and content of SWAP courses. In addition many had remarked on the 'social network' outcomes of such schemes. Courses were seen to engender cohesiveness and support between students and between students and lecturers. Such relationships, especially those between students often continued into higher education and endured even when students were on different courses. Higher

education institutions (HEIs) are generally larger and more impersonal than many of the local colleges where SWAP courses are based. Research has demonstrated (Blair *et al*, 1992) that students and especially mature students often feel isolated in such settings. While the research was primarily interested in how well SWAP courses prepared students for higher education it was felt worthwhile to explore the converse and establish, if and in what ways, higher education institutions acknowledged and possibly supported former SWAP students.

Thus the final round of interviews included a question as to whether or not the university or other higher education institution attended had in any way acknowledged the students' status as former SWAP students.

The majority of the students (11 out of 18 responding) said that the HEIs had in no way acknowledged they had been an Access student. Of the five students who said that the HEI had acknowledged they were SWAP students, three said that this was merely a general welcoming approach, often involving being made aware that staff were there to help. Of the other two students, one said that those involved in the Teaching Quality Assurance exercise had asked to specifically speak to SWAP students and this stimulated the departments interest in their progress. Only one student indicated the department had a designated member of staff who was responsible for operating an 'early warning system' to pick up former SWAP students who may be experiencing difficulties. Thus in all but this last instance, HEIs appeared to do little to acknowledge SWAP students entering their faculties and departments. However, several of the SWAP students stated that they would not have welcomed any special approach, preferring to be treated like the other students. Whether or not SWAP students should have special recognition, it is the case that HEIs are likely to address the student body as a whole without reference to individual background or consideration of potential needs arising from being a mature student, or even a mature student without standard entry qualifications.

■ Students' retrospective reflections on SWAP

The information provided here is based on views expressed in the course of the second and final rounds of interviews, when students were asked to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of Access programmes for mature students entering higher education (second round), and to make a retrospective assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of SWAP (final round). Thus the questions asked at different stages were similar but not identical, approaching the issue from a slightly different focus and elicit responses that reflected the concerns of the student at that time. For example, the most popular response to the earlier question on the *advantages* of SWAP proved to be that it provides a guaranteed way into university. This issue would not have emerged had the questions on both occasions related to the *strengths* of SWAP as preparation for higher education. However, as there was a considerable area of overlap, findings

from both stages of questioning have been drawn together for analysis and discussion.

Responses are summarised below; those at the top of the list were mentioned most frequently by students. It should be stressed that students were generally very positive about their SWAP experiences and how it had prepared them for higher education; many students specified no drawbacks at all. Only three students were predominantly critical (– their views are discussed below).

Figure 7.1

Perceived Advantages/Strengths of SWAP

- Good grounding and academic preparation
- Provides a guaranteed way into university for mature students (provided they pass)
- Eases mature students into higher education
- Lecturers supportive/helpful
- Content related to HE course/good introduction to disciplines
- Builds up fellow student support network for HE
- Builds self confidence
- Develops learning/study skills
- Variety in subjects studied
- Provides familiarity with campus
- Brings together similar people
- Provides essay practice
- Helps cope with exam stress.

Perceived Disadvantages/Weaknesses of SWAP

- Lack of exam experience and practice
- Does not prepare for amount of HE work
- Modules not like HE courses
- Course weak on some topics
- Lack of course guidance for HE
- Level of course too low for higher education
- No essay practice
- Study methods not adequately covered
- Experience unlike university; gives an unrealistic easy view
- Uncritical attitude – continuous praise
- Course too broad.

Positive responses regarding SWAP preparation

Responses such as good grounding and academic preparation, building confidence, having supportive lecturers, and developing learning and study skills – underline the practical efficacy of the main aims of SWAP courses in relation to preparing students for Higher Education. Additionally responses were received which highlight other informal, though perhaps just as important, outcomes from SWAP courses. Several students mentioned the fact that their fellow Access students were other mature students. Traditional routes into higher education such as *via* Highers tend to mean that fellow students are in the main of school age or late teens. Mention was also made of the importance of developing relationships with other such students in providing a support network which was often maintained into university even when students embarked on different higher education courses. Such support networks can help tackle the problems of isolation which tend to be more commonly felt among mature students in higher education institutions (see Blair *et al* 1993 p62). One student summed up many of the advantages and points made by students:

> *'I wouldn't have got into higher education otherwise, I wouldn't have done 'O' grades. SWAP gave a broad basis for study. I was well prepared for the courses that I went on to do. Teachers were first class. Teachers in higher education were not as good as they were. All students were mature – bonded as a group and helped each other out. Access was less isolating than going into a school. We bonded better than in subsequent higher education. It was a worthwhile slog'*

Negative responses regarding SWAP preparation

Few specific comments were received concerning perceived gaps or areas for improvement in SWAP courses.

One of the central aims of SWAP courses is to build confidence of adults who may have limited or negative educational experiences. To this end assessment is generally continuous and examinations are not utilised by many Access courses. However, all former SWAP students who went on to Higher Education faced examinations as one point or another. It is of little surprise then that the most commonly cited gap in Access courses was in examination practice.

Negative comments were generally seen as areas for improving an otherwise good course. However, as noted above, three students were predominantly critical of SWAP. One humanities student felt that on balance the Access course had not prepared her particularly well for university. She went on to point out that the course she undertook was in its first year and she thought that it had improved greatly in following years (She had concluded this from contact and discussion with students who had undertaken the same Access course in following years). The other two had undertaken science based Access courses at different institutions. One of the students suggested that the SWAP Maths course did not prepare them for Maths at university, while the other student felt the quality of the Access course he had completed was of poor quality, that the

college was only interested in filling course places and that out of the six people doing the SWAP course he was the only one who made it to university.

While students were overwhelmingly positive about SWAP courses on balance, there was some evidence from a few of the science students to suggest that there were specific gaps. For example, a few science students commented on SWAP maths classes, saying that they were not of a sufficiently high standard to prepare them for the experience of the subject in higher education. One or two other scientists mentioned lack of lab experience and that the SWAP science courses were too wide in the range of subjects covered. The suggestion here was that courses had to be more focused on particular core subjects to provide the necessary depth of knowledge for higher education.

While these comments may highlight particular gaps in SWAP science courses it is also important to note that the numbers making these comments were relatively low and thus it would be difficult to conclude that Access courses necessarily have specific difficulties in preparing science students?

■ General issues emerging from the SWAP study

While SWAP is a success story for some students, the courses have a heavy task before them and it is not surprising that there is not a close match between the models of learning and teaching practised in SWAP and higher education generally. Finally we raise the questions of whether the experiences of SWAP students are shared by all mature students and even to some extent by all students.

There is no doubt that SWAP is a catalyst for development. Even students who do not proceed into higher education or withdraw before graduating, have extended their knowledge and understanding especially in relation to their own strengths, needs and ambitions. Even a brief skim through the student history summaries of the SWAP cohorts (Appendix 2) gives an impressive picture of the range of experiences and skills of students embarking on SWAP. Professionally qualified people enrol alongside those who have left school without qualifications and have been employed (if at all) in manual or semi-skilled jobs. Many have substantial family responsibilities and/or financial difficulties. What they have in common is an ambition to change and improve their lives.

It must be quite challenging for SWAP designers to devise courses for SWAP students who are older and who probably have more family responsibilities. These fall more heavily on female students and some of them are caught in the middle of providing a home and care for their children but are also the prime carers or have the major responsibility for elderly parents or other relatives experiencing difficulties. As with many mature students, SWAP students are experiencing the conflicting demands of home and study and at a time when they are trying to accommodate a new vision of themselves. What is surprising is not that about half of the cohorts fell away from the research study but that so many students were able to succeed in relatively difficult circumstances.

Some SWAP students report an advantage compared with other mature students because they can draw on the network of SWAP students with whom they built up friendships and support systems, they can avoid the isolation that older students can feel when surrounded by young students straight from school. While not all ex-SWAP students do maintain friendships, it is an asset for those who do.

The remaining general issue to be addressed concerns the difference in learning cultures, the models of learning and teaching to which students are expected to accommodate. SWAP has a certain cosiness which on the positive side implies that students have the necessary support to build up their confidence and develop their learning skills and strategies. Disadvantages are that they can also build up unrealistic expectations of their future university life. SWAP students may not feel prepared for the level and amount of work expected nor for the important diet of examinations common in most higher education. Higher education is not resourced, or at least organised, to provide the continuing individual support achieved through SWAP. This is as much a criticism of higher education provision as a judgement on SWAP. Students need to have the confidence and minimum competence to be able to succeed in higher education but the very methods by which these are obtained through SWAP are not available in higher education. There is a mis-match of culture.

This mis-match is apparent in students' reports of their reception at university where there was little acknowledgement of their age or other courses which are appropriate for the diverse student population. The SWAP gives Access students rights to any organisation in the network. However, it is impossible, even in a relatively small country like Scotland, for an Access programme to prepare students for science/humanities course in all higher education institutions. Inevitably some have close links between Access programmes and the neighbouring HEI. This phase of the research has focused on the self-reporting of Access students and has not been concerned with SWAP providers' perspectives. These providers should be reassured that their students and ex-students made relatively few negative comments on the programmes and perceived few gaps in SWAP provision – other than examination preparation.

SWAP has a big task in coping with a diverse student population which includes many who will rapidly have to raise their levels of debate, writing and analytic reading. More important for these students, as we have seen from this longitudinal study, is SWAP's job in building up an individual's self-esteem to the point where they are confident to decide whether or not they will continue into higher education. Moreover, if they do decide to pursue an education route, they see potential success and the feasibility of attaining a degree or other higher education qualifications.

Embarking on a higher education programme is a limited part of the story. There are good academic reasons why some students experience difficulty in their studies. What they miss in higher education is the opportunity to discuss

these difficulties with their higher education tutors as extensively as they did with the SWAP staff.

The SWAP students commonly experienced other difficulties as they progressed through higher education. The most prevalent of these – as we saw earlier – are financial and personal problems. Shortage of money is resulting in an increase among all students in working in evenings or weekends.

Conclusion

It is apparent that Access courses have to some degree managed to encourage, support and prepare many individuals for higher education, individuals who would not have entered higher education via traditional routes. The longitudinal nature of this study means that the Access courses undertaken by the students took place up to seven years ago. Thus the courses undertaken and experienced by these students will have been in their operational infancy. To some extent these courses will have developed to take account of initial student feedback. Thus the Access experiences of today's SWAP students may be somewhat different from those discussed here.

One of the original aims of SWAP included attracting those groups who were generally underrepresented in higher education, for example, the unemployed, single parents, and women. However, the structure and levels of pastoral care within higher education institutions are unlikely to match those of SWAP courses. If all students are to maximise their educational potential then institutions of higher education have to increase their awareness of and support for the growing diversity of students who enter higher education.

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Appendix 1 – Research procedures

Procedure for contacting students

Letters were sent out to the students requesting an interview, along with a sheet for students to complete and return indicating agreement to be interviewed and suitable times to telephone. Prior to the final round of interviews, a few questions concerning present status (eg graduation, qualification, post graduate study, work) were also included on this sheet. As well as helping the researcher prepare for the interview, this was useful in allowing for the provision of basic information on progress and direction in the case of those (few) students who responded that they did not wish to be interviewed and those (again few) who indicated that they were amenable to interview but who subsequently proved impossible to contact.

Efforts were made to minimise loss of contact through keeping in touch with the students by means of Christmas cards – Christmas falling almost mid-way between rounds of interviews. However, there was some loss of students as time went on (see below), and those who had neither responded to requests for interview at the first nor at the second round were not contacted at the final stage. (These students had been out of touch with the research for three years in the case of humanities students and four in the case of scientists.)

Those who had graduated before the final stage of the research were not re-interviewed unless they had gone on to further study. However, graduates were contacted with a request for basic information on current status and future plans.

Timing of contact

At the first stage of the present research students were often contacted and interviewed prior to learning their examination results. This was especially true of those who had resits, and meant that answers given to the interviewers were often couched with a degree of uncertainty about progress and future plans. The research team therefore decided thereafter to delay the interviewing programme to allow for exam and resit exam results to be known and for students to have decided on their course of action. Findings could then be based on the actuality of the respondents' situations rather than on projected outcomes; to this end interviews were begun in the autumn as opposed to early summer. This approach brought its own drawbacks, however. As anticipated, some of the graduating students had moved away to take up employment or further studies and not all of these students could be contacted for interview, although it was generally possible to update basic information on their progress by speaking to relatives.

Contact achieved

At the outset of this SOEID funded phase of the research, the target number for interview concerning academic experience was 75, representing exactly three quarters of the original group of one hundred SWAP students. The remaining 25 students either did not go on to higher education following SWAP [9], had lost touch or declined further involvement with the research during phase 1 [11], or had dropped out of higher education during phase 1 [5].

Of the 75 students whom the researchers sought to contact at the outset of phase 2:

- 22 could not be contacted at all
- 53 were in touch with the research at some point.

Details of contact with the group of 53 over the course of the present research are as follows:

- 38 students were interviewed concerning their academic experiences at least until completion of a first higher educational qualification
- 2 students were interviewed until the final stages of the research, when they still remained undergraduates
- 1 student maintained contact but was on extended time-out throughout the research programme, and so was never interviewed concerning her academic experience
- 7 students were interviewed concerning their academic experiences at some point, but lost contact prior to obtaining a qualification
- 2 students provided basic information on progress throughout and were interviewed at the first round, but declined to be interviewed at the later two stages
- 3 were never interviewed nor was basic information on higher education outcome provided (2 declined to be interviewed and one agreed to an interview but could not be contacted despite many attempts).

As a result, the total number of students interviewed concerning their academic experiences at some point in the course of the present phase was 49. The number who provided basic information on outcome and/or position on completion of the research was 43. However, outcomes are known in respect of 57 students from the original cohort as 14 students had either not gone on to higher education following SWAP or had dropped out of higher education during phase one of the research. These figures are translated into response rates in Appendix 1.

Loss of contact

The loss of students from the research sample was proportionately greater among science students. (for details see Appendix 2). This disproportionate drop in contact largely dates from the period between the two research phases. Twelve of the 22 students lost between phases 1 and 2 were science students. This figure

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represents 40% of the 30 science students who were in higher education and in touch with the research at the close of phase 1. On the other hand, only 23% of the relevant humanities students were lost between the two phases of the research. The explanation for this most probably lies in the research programme. First contact with all students in the course of phase 2 of the research was in summer 1994. Science students had not been interviewed for two years at this point, while humanities students had been approached the year before, and so it is perhaps not surprising that loss of contact between the two phases was proportionately greater in respect of science students.

It should be noted that only a few students refused to be interviewed, and that most of those who participated appeared keen to talk about their experiences. However, the fairly large number who simply did not reply to requests for interview is likely to have included an element of passive refusal.

Interviews conducted

The group of students available for interview in the course of this second phase of the research was predominantly female, and predominantly studying arts. As Table 1.1 shows:

- Two thirds were arts students and one third scientists.
- Two thirds were female and one third male.

Table 1.1 Students interviewed regarding academic experience

Field of Study	Male	Female	ALL
Science	10	6	16
Humanities	6	27	33
TOTAL	16	33	49

There are two main reasons for the predominance of arts students among the interviewees, despite the original humanities and science cohorts having been of similar size. Firstly, students who started out as scientists were more likely to make the change to a humanities course than *vice versa*. Secondly and more significantly, students lost to the research were disproportionately scientists (as discussed above). The predominance of females largely results from this, for the most part simply reflecting the high proportion of women in the humanities cohort (see Chapter 3).

A total of 98 interviews were conducted concerning the higher education experiences of these students. These are summarised in Table 1.2, while Appendix 5 Chart 1 gives an overview of these interviews on a student by student basis.

Table 1.2 Interviews conducted regarding academic experience

Stage of Study	Science	Humanities	ALL
First Year	1	2	3
Second Year	2	31	33
Third Year	11	25	36
Fourth/Honours Year	6	12	18
Post Graduate	2	2	4
Other (see Chart 1)	4	0	4
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	26	72	98

Table 1.3 looks at coverage in terms of the average number of interviews conducted per student. It is notable that coverage of humanities courses was markedly higher than science courses in terms of the average number of interviews per student. This arose because, as previously noted, the science group were for the most part a year ahead of the humanities group, with most scientists first interviewed following third year, at which point graduation was a possibility. Therefore a greater proportion of the science group than the humanities group had completed their higher education by the time of the second and third rounds of interviews. The higher coverage of female students arises from the predominance of females on humanities courses and males among the scientists.

Table 1.3 Average number of interviews per student

	Students	Interviews	Interviews per Student
Science	16	26	1.63
Humanities	33	72	2.18
Male	16	27	1.69
Female	33	71	2.15
TOTAL	49	98	2.00

Appendix 2 – Response rates

■ Students interviewed

How the figure of 49 students interviewed translates into a response rate depends on the basis taken for the calculation. This figure represents just over half of the 89 students who went on to higher education following completion of SWAP. However, a case can be made for basing the calculation on the group of 74 students who were in touch with the research on completion of phase one and in higher education at some point in the course of phase 2. Against this background, the response rate in terms of interview at some point in the course of phase 2 is 49 from 74 or 66%. It should be noted, however, that fifteen of the 49 were not interviewed on all of the relevant occasions; (details of interviews conducted can be found in Table 4.2 and Appendix chart 1).

The loss of students from the research sample was proportionately greater among science students. Of the 74 continuing students in touch with the research at the close of phase 1, thirty were scientists and 44 humanities students; sixteen of the science students were interviewed at some point (53%), as compared to 33 of the humanities students (75%).

■ Knowledge of outcome

Basic information on outcome or, in the case of the few remaining undergraduates, present position, is available in respect of 57 of the original study group of one hundred. This group comprises the 43 who provided basic information in the course of phase 2, the five who had dropped out of higher education during phase 1, and the nine who did not go on to higher education at all. The success rate of the present research in terms of providing basic information on outcome/present position is also 57% (i.e. 43 of the 75 higher education students remaining in touch with the research at the close of phase 1).

In terms of the 89 former SWAP students who went on to higher education, information on educational outcome or present position is available in respect of 48 students or 54%, while 41 students lost contact before attaining a higher education qualification. If we concentrate specifically on knowledge of educational outcome by excluding from the figures the three students who remained undergraduates on completion of the research, then information is available in respect of 45 students, representing half of those who went on to higher education.

Appendix 3 – Summary of Cohort and Student Histories

This appendix comprises a summary of cohort progress, followed by a brief history in respect of each of the one hundred students in the original cohort group. The student histories cover progress into higher education, qualifications attained, career plans, and outcomes, and are grouped according to the categories used in the cohort history summary

COHORT HISTORY SUMMARY

STATUS	Science Students			Humanities Students			Total Students		
	Male	*Female*	*All*	*Male*	*Female*	*All*	*Male*	*Female*	*All*
BEGAN ACCESS COURSE (SWAP)	28	20	48	14	38	52	42	58	100
(I) Did Not Complete SWAP Successfully	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	2
(II) Did not Intend to Start Higher Education/Lost Contact: Intentions Unknown	1	4	5	2	2	4	3	6	9
Changed Intention re Field of Study Before Entry to Higher Education - Students	1->	2->	3->	0	<-1	<-1	-	-	-
- Net Change	-1	-1>	-2	+1	+1	+1	-	-	-
BEGAN HIGHER EDUCATION	25	14	39	13	37	50	38	51	89
Changed Field of Study During Higher Education - Students	*0*	*2>*	*2->*	*0*	*<-1*	*<-1*	-	-	-
- Net Change	*none*	*-1*	*-1*	*none*	*+1*	*+1*	-	-	-
(III) Lost Contact Before Commencing Course	2	2	4	1	2	3	3	4	7
(IV) Lost Contact After Commencing Course	10	6	16	8	10	18	18	16	34
(V) Continuing Undergraduate	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	3	3
(VI) Did Not Complete Course	3	0	3	1	1	2	4	1	5
(VII-IX) OBTAINED HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATION	**10**	**5***	**15**	**3***	**22**	**25**	**13**	**27**	**40**

* Each of these two groups includes one student who obtained an HNC before going on to a degree course (one dropped out and one lost contact with the research).

STUDENT HISTORIES

Key to reference codes:-
M = Male S = Science Student F = Female H = Non-Science/Humanities Student

(I) Did not complete Access course successfully

Ref. Code	Reason	Status	Plans	Remarks
52M/S	Gained only a few modules: insufficient for H.E.	Unemployed following Access	Might study for 'O' grade maths. Seeking work.	Found SWAP more difficult than expected. Felt that he should have done pre-access first. However, felt that the year in SWAP was positive in that it might help in the search for work.
98F/S	Dropped out of Access at an early stage because she didn't like physics - a major part of the course.	Unemployed following Access	Enrolling to study Highers at college on a part-time basis. Hoped to go on to Higher Education, possibly to study psychology or philosophy.	It would have been possible to drop physics and still carry on with the course. However, by the time she realised this she had prepared to leave and felt that she was too far behind to catch up. Had intended to go on to study for degree in Engineering but lost interest due to the anticipated high physics content.

(II) Did not intend to go on to Higher Education (when last contacted)/intentions unknown

Ref. Code	Status	Plans	Remarks
03M/S	After Access course worked as power press operator in manufacturing.	Stay in present job 'until something comes up which allows me to better myself'.	Had hoped to study Computing Science but discovered grant would be insufficient. Extremely disappointed. 'Unless I have a windfall financially, there will be no more F.E.'
13F/S	Unemployed following Access course. Undertaking voluntary work at youth club.	Seeking work - had applied for several jobs. Might apply to start Open University in Feb. '93 if no suitable job forthcoming.	Hoping to find employment which would provide some scientific/technical training, possibly on a day release basis. No university locally and she wouldn't move for at least 3 years because of the disruption to her children's education which this would entail. Intended to apply to study Biological Sciences in 3 years time if not already in 'a good job' or started at Open University (single parent - felt that residential summer school might prove a barrier to the latter).
46F/H	Unemployed as of Dec. 1995. Undertaking voluntary work (children's panel).	Seeking a job.	Single parent. Saw education primarily as a means towards self-fulfilment. Was accepted for a place at university but turned it down in the face of lack of confidence in her capabilities and in view of prospective difficulties of managing on a grant.
84M/H	After Access course undertook employment training: office skills course.	Unclear about plans when interviewed.	Very keen to study but finance makes university difficult - no grant.
94M/H	Unknown	Unknown	Did not keep appointment for interview.
95F/H	Did not go on to H.E. after Access.	Unknown	Had intended to study Social Anthropology.
107F/S	Unknown	Unknown	Agreed to interview but attempts to arrange this were unsuccessful.
108F/S	Unpaid part-time work in friend's business, health permitting.	Hoped to study Community Education or Retail Management at a later stage.	Had a place on a Community Education course but developed serious health problems necessitating prolonged hospital treatment. Was advised not to start the course on medical grounds.
109F/S	Moved to the Philippines, as her husband was posted there.	Unknown	Had hoped to study Marine Biology and when last contacted directly was finding out whether her qualifications would be acceptable for entry to Guam University. Her mother later provided the information that she was not in Higher Education.

(III) Intended higher education: lost contact before course commenced

Ref. Code	Plans	Remarks
17F S → H	HND in Hospitality.	With a view to running a hotel abroad Had taken the science Access course.
26M/S	Degree in Nursing.	'Always wanted to be a nurse'.
34F/S	Computing/engineering.	Trying to decide where to study - accepted by all the institutions she applied to.
36M S → H	Hospitality Management course.	Had a conditional acceptance to study Biotechnology but took job as a croupier for summer on leaving SWAP (science course) and 'got used to the money'. Forced to give this up (lost use of car: shifts not possible by public transport). Intended to apply to Hospitality Management course with aim of becoming a hotel manager, and to reapply to study Biotechnology as a second choice.
42F H → S	Univ[illegible]sity: aimed to be a nurse.	Had followed the non-science Access course. Declined to be interviewed further.
54 F/H	To study po[illegible]ics/sociology to degree level.	Dropped out of HNC Public Admin. in first year following an accident. Decided she would prefer change of course anyway. Expected to start new course in 1994.
97M/S	Electronic Engineerin[illegible]at polytechnic.	Not willing to be interviewed further.

(IVa) Began course: lost contact during or immediately after 1st Year

Ref. Code	Course	Remarks
06M/H	BA in Social Science	Last interviewed on initial progression to Higher Education
16F/S	Unspecified Higher Education	During Access planned to go on to study for BSc in agriculture. Had the offer of a university place for autumn '91 but decided she'd prefer to work: 'just changed my mind'. In 1994 indicated that she was at an unspecified stage of an unspecified H.E. course and did not wish interview(she may have gone beyond 1st year by this time, depending on when she began the course.)
24F/H	HNC Social Science	Planned to go on to university.
53 F/H	BA in Psychology/Sociology/German	Doing well academically but experiencing expected financial difficulties.
50F/S	Diploma in Ophthalmic Dispensing	Did not get through 1st year at first attempt. As she had failed everything she was not eligible for a grant and was obliged to take a year out before repeating 1st year in the 93/94 session when she passed with no resits. Last contact with the research was interview about this session.
70M/H	MA in English Literature and History	Following Access course deferred entry to university for a year due to lack of money. Interviewed in '94 regarding 1st year experience. Did not respond to later requests for interview.
82M/S	HND in Computing	Hoped to change course.
96F/S	Diploma in Diagnostic Radiography	Declined to be interviewed after starting course.

No further remarks regarding these students

Ref. Code	Course	Ref. Code	Course
04F/S	BTechEd	60M/H	Social Admin. at University
11M/S	BEng	61M/S	BEng
19M/S	Diploma in Horticulture at Agricultural College	65M/S	BSc in Electrical Engineering
27M/S	Maths course at Polytechnic	67M/S	BSc in Electrical Systems
32M/H	Political Studies at University	74M/H	Psychology at University
33F/H	Social Science at University	79M/H	English Literature at University
38F/H	Psychology at University	81M/S	HND in Electrical Systems
41M/S	HND Computing	86F/H	Philosophy at university
55F/H	Psychology at University	92F/S	BTech at College
59F/S	BSc in Physiotherapy		

NOTES (1) The great majority of these students were followed to completion of first year. Exceptions are cases 06, 16, and 96.
(2) Few of these students had any contact with the research during phase 2. Exceptions are cases 16, 50, and 70: cases 50 and 70 were interviewed.

(IVb) Started higher education and progressed beyond 1st year: lost contact before graduation

Ref. Code	Last Known Stage	Plans	Remarks
18 F/H	4th year of MA course (autumn '95).	Undertook the course as education for its own sake. Felt age (47 at Access) prohibitive of a career.	Unable to contact at the final stage of the research.
25 F/H	Studying psychology/sociology at university: stage unknown ('94-'95 academic year).	Plans unknown.	Last interviewed on completion of 1st year in summer '93. In '95 indicated that she was in Higher Education and willing to be interviewed: however, it proved impossible to contact her.
28 F/H	4th year of MA course (autumn '95).	To become a teacher.	Unable to contact at the final stage of the research.
48 M/H	4th year of MA course (autumn '95).	To become a teacher.	Unable to contact at the final stage of the research. Decided to aim for single honours in Politics rather than joint honours in German and Politics because of the workload implications. Had experienced difficulty with German in 2nd year.
57 M/S	2nd year of Aquatic Biology course at university ('94-'95 academic year).	Plans unknown.	Started BSc in Marine Biology autumn '91 but failed first year. Took 2 years out of Higher Education thereafter, working as a painter and decorator. Embarked on Aquatic Biology course in autumn 1994, entering at second year level. In 1995 indicated that he was in Higher Education but did not wish to be interviewed.
78 F/H	2nd year of MA course (completed summer '94).	No definite career plans.	Unable to contact in the later stages of the research.
91 M/H	2nd year of BA course (completed summer '94).	To become a teacher.	Had a resit pending. Unable to contact in the later stages of the research.

NOTES: (1) In addition, case 80 (Group IX 'Obtained Other Qualification') subsequently began a degree course on block release but lost contact with the research after completing the first half.
(2) All had some contact with the research during phase 2 and all but cases 25 and 57 were interviewed.

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(V) Continuing undergraduate

Ref. Code	Course	Stage as of 1995-96 academic year	Outcome/Plans	Remarks
47 F/H	MA	Time out since completion of 1st year in summer 1993.	Plans to continue the course, starting autumn 1997. On graduation would like to work with adults, perhaps as a community worker.	Took time out because her husband's business was experiencing financial problems and she was required to do secretarial work there. Very disappointed at this and eager to return to study. Had considered transferring to an Open University course in order to continue to work while studying, but decided that 'OU would not have suited me'.
68 F/H	MA in Sociology / Social Policy	3rd year	Progressed to 4th (honours) year. Remains interested in original goal of working in social work, youth and community work, or adult education but has broadened areas which she is willing to consider (to include, for example, the prison service) with a view to improving chances of finding a job.	Took a year out between 2nd and 3rd year.
75F/H	MA in Social Science	2nd year	Progressed to 3rd year: intends ordinary degree. Would like to work in a caring profession such as social work but in a post which would not necessitate further study.	Was obliged to abandon studies in first year and take a year out in order to be with sick adult daughter. Repeated first year when daughter's condition improved and has continued to persevere in the face of family problems and severe financial difficulties. Originally aimed to become a clinical psychologist, but had problems with the statistical part of the psychology component of the course, so changed tack within the same degree course and modified goals, initially considering counselling/teaching in an FE college. Later change of plan reflects wish to avoid the need for further study.

Key to reference codes:-
M = Male S = Science Student F = Female H = Non-Science/Humanities Student

(VI) Began course: did not attain a higher education qualification

Ref. Code	Course	Dropped Out: When?	Dropped Out: Why?	Status/Plans	Remarks
07 M/H	BA Social Science	Early in first year.	Not enjoying course.	Took up offer of job working with mentally handicapped people.	No academic problems.
51 F/H	Social Science (university)	During 1st year.	Stopped course on medical advice.	Immediate plan to sign on for social security benefits. No longer term plans.	Health broke down in the face of pre-existing financial and personal problems.
76 M/S	B Engineering	After 1st year.	Failed maths.	Working as aircraft electrician (had been an electrical prior to Access). Will consider returning to education if laid off work.	Had suspected 'might be lagging behind in maths' on completion of SWAP. Felt that assistance to support him on his course of study had been lacking when he failed maths. Began looking for work before resit result available.
77 M/S	BSc Physics with laser science	On completion of 1st year.	Failed 1st year.	To get a job.	Initially saw break from higher education as 'taking a year out'. Mentioned money and motivation problems.
88 M/S	HND Engineering	Completed 1st year summer '92. Not in higher education when contacted two years later.	Unknown	Unknown	When contacted in '94 indicated that he was no longer in Higher Education and did not wish to be interviewed further.

NOTE: In addition, case 43 M/H in group IX dropped out of a degree course after obtaining an HNC

(VII) Graduated with ordinary degree

Ref. Code	Year Graduated	Degree	Outcome/Plans	Remarks
05 F/H	1995	BA in Applied Social Science	Subsequently obtained MSc in Information and Administrative Management. When interviewed shortly after graduation from this course was seeking work as an administrator or management trainee.	Would have liked to become a teacher but failed to obtain place on teacher training course.
08 F/H	1995	BA in Social Science	Subsequently obtained post graduate Certificate in Education (Secondary) and began work as a supply teacher.	Had planned to become a teacher from the outset.
09 F/S	1994	BSc in Maths	Working as GP fundholding manager. Possibility of studying for MBA.	Had originally planned to become a maths teacher and had been accepted for a place on the relevant training course. Decided against further study, however, in view of family commitments (mother of three) and since she had a job 'lined up' on graduation, having done project work for her subsequent employers during higher education.
12F H → S	1995	BSc in Sociology	On graduating began temporary clerical work through an agency. In 1996 applied for a place on 'a 2 year course for graduates specialising in mental health'.	Changed course from Psychology in Arts faculty in the face of stress and 2nd year results which 'did not engender confidence'. However, sees prospective course as allowing her to continue her interest in this field.
22 M/S	1994	BSc in Quantity Surveying	Unemployed on graduating. Hoped for an interesting and varied job with reasonable pay. When contacted a year later had found work relating to the construction of the new Hong Kong airport.	Unable to contact at the final stage of the research.
31 F/H	1995	MA	Unemployed on graduating. Would have liked to be a teacher and intended to seek advice from careers service.	Did not get high enough mark in 2nd year to go on to honours in English Literature as planned. Felt that her age (around fifty) was against her in her desire to become a teacher. Unable to contact at the final stage of the research.

Key to reference codes:-

VII continued overleaf/

(VII) Graduated with ordinary degree (contd.)

Ref. Code	Year Graduated	Degree	Outcome/Plans	Remarks
39 F/H	1995	MA	On graduating found work in Community Education (but was off sick when interviewed). When contacted in '96 was training for work via research based a local authority facility, and seeking research work.	Saw education as a means to personal fulfilment: felt had never fulfilled potential at school. Felt that her age (49 on completion of SWAP) would be an obstacle to employment. Decided to graduate after 3rd year because stress could exacerbate a health problem. In 1996 indicated 'I am uncertain at present [regarding future plans] and finding great difficulty in even obtaining interviews'.
40 F/H	1995	MA	Unemployed on graduating. Seeking work through graduate jobclub.	Unable to contact at the final stage of the research.
44 F/H	1995	BA in Social Studies	On waiting list for place on Post Graduate course leading to Diploma in Careers.	Decided against 4th (Honours) year at a late stage, leaving her too late to apply for a post-graduate course for the '95-'96 session. Unable to contact at the final stage of the research.
71 F/S	1995	Advanced Ordinary BSc in Developmental Biology	Went on to study for MSc in Equine Science, including research on the captive equine population; hopes to go on to undertake zoo based conservation work.	Passed second year exams first time but did not attain sufficient points for progression to honours. Scottish office agreed grant to repeat second year because of the effect of exceptional circumstances on academic performance. Passed exams in 3rd - junior honours - year, but did not attain the special pass mark deemed necessary for progression to 4th year, nor was there provision for resits. Felt that ill health had played a part in producing these results, and was obliged to take a year out due to illness between graduation and commencement of present course.
83F S → H	1994	BA in Community Education	Found work in Community Education and, encouraged by her employer, began to study for an MEd.	Was originally on BEdTech course but transferred after 1st year because she found the 9-5 schedule 'too intense' and too costly in terms of the necessary childcare; also felt at a disadvantage as a potential teacher through being an older woman and therefore 'lacking technical background'. Commented 'I am happy with my choice of degree, career, and present job'.
85 M/S	1994	BSc in Electrical and Electronic Eng	Unemployed on graduating. Wished to work in 'computer communications'.	Unable to contact in the later stages of the research.
89 F/H	1995	MA	Seeking work when contacted in 1996.	Started out without a particular career goal in mind. Declined to be interviewed after the first round of the present phase, but provided basic information on outcome by post.

Key to reference codes:- M = Male S = Science Student F = Female H = Non-Science/Humanities Student

(VIII) Graduated with honours degree

Ref. Code	Year Graduated	Degree	Outcome/Plans	Remarks
01 F/H	1996	MA in Economic History	Studying for Masters' degree in Economic History. Hopes to find work in administration or research.	Originally thought of going into banking or business but as time went on found subject intrinsically interesting and no longer saw it as a means to an end. Had hoped to find work on graduation but found that this would require her to obtain a post-graduate qualification first.
02 F/H	1996	BA in Social Science	Studying for a Master's in Women's Studies on a part time basis (one day per week). Hopes to go on to become a lecturer or adult teacher.	Changed institution to allow her to specialise in Sociology, which was not possible on the Social Science course she started on. As a single parent with a sick mother is coping with considerable duties as a carer and is uncertain as to whether she will be able to complete her present course.
10 M/S	1995	BSc in Chemistry	Went on to study for Master's Degree.	Unable to contact at the final stage of the research.
14 F/S	1995	BEng	Working as Automatic Control Engineer for a major company. Possibility of an international position in a few years time.	Obtained 1st class honours and won a prize. Had option of going on to study for Masters Degree but felt it would be 'too much hassle/pressure on life'.
20 F/H	1996	MA in Sociology	Obtained temporary work in an office on graduating. Later found the research work desired, albeit on a five month temporary contract.	Subject change after 2nd year from Social Anthropology to Sociology, which she found more interesting and felt provided more employment options. At this stage was considering community education or social work. Ultimate preference for research reflects both growing interest in this field and perceptions of the job market.
23 M/S	1995	BEng in Civil Engineering	Found work as a graduate engineer in local authority engineering department. Undertaking further training through his employer in conjunction with the relevant professional bodies, aiming for chartered status.	
29 F/H	1996	MA in Sociology	Working part-time as theatre usher. Seeking other work. Wants to be an artist.	Had been studying psychology but academic performance insufficient for honours: enjoyed sociology and wanted an honours degree. At this stage interested in counselling and in the area of mental health: considered going on to study Art Therapy. Interest in work as an artist emerged from 'one or two projects at university'.
30 M/H	1996	BA in Social Science	Working as an HGV driver while seeking work in housing or local government.	Will seek a post graduate qualification if necessary in a order to achieve employment objectives.

Table VIII continued overleaf/

(VIII) Graduated with honours degree (contd.)

Ref. Code	Year Graduated	Degree	Outcome/Plans	Remarks
35 F S → H	1996	MA in Gaelic Studies	Studying for MLitt researching Gaelic proverbs: building on work undertaken for honours dissertation	Had undertaken science based Access course. Delayed entry to Higher Education for a year because personal circumstances precluded the necessary travel. Open minded about career options. Degree featured maths and she could go on to become a maths teacher: meantime has taken up the opportunity for academic research.
37 M/S	1995	BSc in Physics	Began study for an MSc in Information Technology on a part-time basis. HOPES TO TEACH, because job prospects are good and teacher friends have provided encouragement.	Started to study without particular career goal in mind, intending to specialise as course progressed.
45 F/H	1996	MA in Sociology	Working part-time as a midwife as she has done from the outset of SWAP and undertaking temporary data processing work for a research organisation, also on a part time basis. Seeking post as teacher/researcher in the health service or related field.	Had intended to continue with midwifery for the foreseeable future but, with the unit in which she is working now under threat, is looking to 'move on before pushed'.
49 M/H	1996	MA in Social Policy	Unemployed: seeking community work.	
56 F/H	1996	BA in Social Studies & Diploma in Social Work	Working as a social worker.	
58 M/S	1995	BSc in Physics	Subsequently obtained post graduate Certificate of Education and began work as a supply teacher in physics and general science. Seeking a full time permanent job as a physics teacher.	Would have considered 'going into industry' if he had obtained a first or upper second: planned teaching otherwise.
62 M/S	1995	BSc in Geology and Applied Geology	Unemployed on graduating. Began to study for Diploma/MSc in Information Technology autumn '96. Hopes to find work in this sector and is particularly interested in the internet.	Had originally hoped to work in the field of his degree.
56 F/H	1996	BA in Social Studies & Diploma in Social Work	Working as a social worker.	

Table VIII continued overleaf/

(VIII) Graduated with honours degree (contd.)

Ref. Code	Year Graduated	Degree	Outcome/Plans	Remarks
58 M/S	1995	BSc in Physics	Subsequently obtained post graduate Certificate of Education and began work as a supply teacher in physics and general science. Seeking a full time permanent job as a physics teacher.	Would have considered 'going into industry' if he had obtained a first or upper second: planned teaching otherwise.
62 M/S	1995	BSc in Geology and Applied Geology	Unemployed on graduating. Began to study for Diploma/MSc in Information Technology autumn '96. Hopes to find work in this sector and is particularly interested in the internet.	Had originally hoped to work in the field of his degree.
63 M/S	1995	BEng in Environmental Engineering	Working as a material handler. Seeking quality assurance work, which would 'complement degree and job prospects'	
64 M/S	1996	BEng in Mech and Electronic Systems	Unemployed and seeking work as a chartered mechanical engineer.	5 yr degree course.
66 F/H	1996	BA in Business Economics	Unemployed and seeking work in Administration or Marketing	Declined to be interviewed after the first round of the present phase, but provided basic information on outcome by post.
69 F S → H	1996	BA in Industrial Relations	Unemployed and seeking work in personnel/human resources. Undertaking part-time course in Training Practice at college.	Started on BSc Prosthetics and Orthotics course but left it after 1st yr. Did not enjoy it: had problems with maths and could not cope with both a 9-5 day and child care commitments. Still wants to work with people (as reflected in present goals).
72 F/H	1996	MA in English Literature	Native Dutch speaker, started her own business, providing translation services and advice Dutch on literature and plays. Also teaching evening classes in Dutch 'new horizon' course.	Began teaching evening classes while still at university. Translation services include acting as interpreter in court.
73 F/H	1996	MA in Scottish Historical Studies	Obtained research studentship working towards PhD. Would like to work in area of her degree, perhaps in a museum.	Studentship involves teaching commitments. Feels there is little relevant work available.
87 F/H	1996	MA in Politics	Moved to London.	Continued to work part-time as newspaper sub-editor in order to fund study. Unable to clarify outcome as final phase of research coincided with move.
90 F/H	1996	MA	Undertook word processing 'package' at college. Found administration work with the local authority.	Would like to work in the area of social policy

(IX) Obtained other qualification

Ref. Code	Qualification(s)	Year Obtained	Outcome/Plans	Remarks
15 M/S	HND in Computing; Advanced Diploma in Multimedia Software Engineering; MSc in Informatics	MSc in 1996	Self-employed as trainer/lecturer, including work with students on pre-Access course	Thought it 'safer to aim at a lower level and slowly progress'.
43 M/H	HNC in Social Science	1993	Began to study for BA in Social Science, but dropped out at some point following 2nd year, having failed two of the five second year exams. Working part-time when last contacted.	
80 F/S	HNC in Biological Sciences (2 year day release course)	1993	Embarked on 6 block degree course at the Institute of Biological and Medical Science. By the end of '95 had completed 3 blocks. Ultimate aim is to achieve promotion with current employer.	Has been employed in the same job as a lab technician throughout (started on YTS). Took time out from higher education after obtaining HNC. Unable to contact at final stage of the research.

Appendix 4 – Students who failed or missed examinations

Thirteen students, representing just over a quarter of the 47 who had sat examinations, had experienced exam failure at some point in the course of the year(s) concerning which they were interviewed in phase 2. This appendix concerns this group of students, with information on the nature of any problems experienced, a description of the exam preparation strategies used, details of assistance from tutors and lecturers in respect of preparation, and information on the outcome of resits. (Exam failures occurring during phase one of the research are not covered here.)

The reference numbers used here correspond to those used to identify these same students in the case history summaries (Appendix 3).

(15) A student on Advanced Diploma in Software Engineering course, who failed one exam

Problems Experienced: Reported that he was coping well academically but experiencing marked financial difficulties; said that such difficulties adversely affected his motivation. Also felt 'fed up' with exam preparation, this being his fourth consecutive year of study.

Preparation: Listened carefully to the areas tutors emphasise, to try to anticipate areas covered. Spent some time studying in small groups and some time studying alone. Tends to 'cram' spending only one week studying for exams.

Perceived Need for Change: Would attempt to spread out studying over longer period and avoid 'cramming'.

Help with Preparation: Class had 'dummy' tests for practice, lecturers then went over the answers with the class. Found this help effective.

Outcome: Passed resit and attained diploma.

(21) A law student, who failed one examination in second year

Problems Experienced: Had found the course material boring and very difficult, and the course 'dense' due to the increased workload resulting from an extra half course in second year.

Exam Preparation: Had been done in 'a blind panic' the night before. Two exams had allowed for the preparation of a folder of reference material, and she had spend a lot of time assembling this but had neglected to really learn the material.

Perceived Need for Change: Would hope to start studying earlier and 'keep more on top of things' during the year.

Help with Preparation: Revision tutorials had been provided and she had not felt the need of further help from academic staff.

Outcome: Went on to pass all third year exams, but still felt that she could have prepared earlier to avoid 'cramming'. Graduated with ordinary degree.

(31) A third year MA student, who was required to resit one exam

Problems Experienced: Had found one subject – Scottish History – particularly difficult, with the width of the subject taxing her memory. Found that with eight subjects a lot of material had to be covered.

Preparation: Had worked alone, using previous years' papers to focus studying and reading relevant material; had spent considerable time on this.

Perceived Need for Change: None.

Help with Preparation: Would have liked staff teaching Scottish History to have provided some guidance on what would and what would not be covered in the exam; this guidance had been provided in respect of other subjects.

Outcome: Passed resit and graduated with ordinary degree.

(35) A second year MA student, who failed one exam and missed two others

Problems Experienced: Bore the emotional and practical burdens of coping with serious illness and hospitalisation on the part of her father and also experienced ill health herself.

Preparation: All resits were in mathematics. Remarked:

'I hadn't enough time for maths practice. You can get away with it for other subjects, but need to study maths systematically – doing so many examples, getting your speed up.'

Perceived Need for Change: Felt problems had primarily arisen as a result of abnormal personal circumstances. Might try to do more work during the course of the year.

Help with Preparation: Staff had been understanding in the face of problems, providing individual attention if required, revising topics in response to class requests prior to the exam, and going over past papers; rated this as effective/very effective, depending on the staff involved.

Outcome: Discussed with her adviser of studies the possibility of taking a year out to regain her health. In the event her resits were successful and she decided to press on. However, her own recurring health problems – which left her very fatigued and with difficulty concentrating – and those of

her father would be an continuing burden. Found the department very understanding and supportive, granting extensions on essay deadlines if required. Graduated with honours degree.

(40) An MA student, who failed one exam in second year

Problems Experienced: Described herself as 'scraping through', finding English Literature and Philosophy particularly tough. Had to resit metaphysics after missing a question. Said that prior to starting university she had not sat an exam other than the old '11 plus' more than thirty years before.

Preparation: No preparation ahead of time: revision done at the last minute, studying throughout the night prior to the exam

'I worry about it until the last minute and then try to cram everything in. This is not the way to do it ... If I'm failing it's my own fault, by not putting in enough time.'

Perceived Need for Change: Would like to study in a planned fashion and pace time better.

Help with Preparation: None. Would have appreciated help with what to review and how to review it. (Remarked that she had not sat an exam since the 'eleven plus'.)

Outcome: Went on to third year and felt that she coped well, despite continuing to cram revision at the last minute. Graduated with ordinary degree.

(43) A Social Science BA student, who failed two out of five subject examinations in 2nd year

(This student had previously attained an HNC, entering the degree course at second year level)

Problems Experienced: None. Felt he was coping well.

Preparation: Described as 'private study'.

Perceived Need for Change: None.

Help with Preparation: Provision of past papers. Given some idea as to the topics which would feature in the exam.

Outcome: It would appear that he went on to third year or a repeat of second year, but dropped out before completing the course.

(Replied to request for interview the following year, saying that he had been in higher education over the course of the previous academic year. Could not be contacted for interview, but relatives provided the information that he was no longer in higher education and was working part time. Again agreed to interview at the final stage, confirming that he had not been in higher education over the course of the previous academic year. In view of

this, decided to seek relevant information by post, but he did not respond to the questionnaire sent.)

(48) An MA student, who failed one of three subject examinations in 2nd year

Problems Experienced: Had taken three higher ordinary subjects to maximise choices for honours year. This meant a greater volume of work and an increased degree of difficulty.

Preparation: Reviewed extensive lecture notes. Had some difficulty regarding access to several books. Did secondary reading. Used a friend of 'similar age and ability' to 'bounce things off'. Generally spends anywhere from 1 week to 1 month preparing for an exam, but had had 2 exams within 24 hrs and had studied intensively for one and not enough for the other.

Perceived Need for Change: Would possibly give a bit more time to revision.

Help with Preparation: Lecturers to varying degrees gave a certain amount of advice on how to prepare for examinations. Found this very useful.

Outcome: Progressed to honours year but lost contact with the research prior to graduation.

(49) An MA student, who failed psychology in second year

Problems Experienced: Student said he was coping well academically and did not report any other problems. However had failed psychology in first year and, having carried this class over to second year, had failed it again.

Preparation: Looked over lecture notes and essays, targeting particular questions. Spent an equal amount of time on each subject, working steadily throughout the year.

Perceived Need for Change: None.

Help with Preparation: None. Would have appreciated guidance regarding how to answer exam questions.

Outcome: Went on to gain honours degree in Social Policy.

(56) A student who failed one exam in the third year of a BA in Applied Social Science

Problems Experienced: Found the course generally difficult and the workload pressurised, with fortnightly essays in the second half of the year.

Preparation: 'Very much last minute'.

Perceived Need for Change: Hoped to devote more time to preparing for final exams, as the workload in terms of other assessed work (essays) would be lighter than in third year.

Help with Preparation: A revision seminar prior to exam was particularly helpful given that the semester system meant that much material had originally been covered months before.

Outcome: Passed resit well and continued to honours.

(58) A BSc Physics student, who missed one third year exam

Problems Experienced: Experienced some conceptual difficulties with the work. Found the January diet of examinations difficult and failed one on account of non-attendance. Had decided not to sit the exam because he had lacked the time to revise. This was as a result of ill health: he himself had had a bout of flu and his elderly parents had also been ill.

Preparation: With some subjects could get through with a day and a half of study while others required weeks. Had to work very hard, during week and at weekends. Averaged a 60 hour week. Used past papers to get an idea of the style of questions asked.

Perceived Need for Change: None.

Help with Preparation: Lecturers went over past papers showing how they would answer them. They described the course content which gave an indication of the exam content. Generally they were helpful and approachable. However, he found that the lecturer to whom he went for assistance regarding his conceptual difficulties was limited in his ability to help through having poor English (it was his second language) and through being 'a genius who can't come down to our level'.

Outcome: Passed resit and went on graduate with honours.

(75) An MA student, who carried a first year class over and failed two second year exams

Problems Experienced: Was first interviewed in the course of the present phase of the research when she returned to higher education to repeat first year, having previously abandoned her studies in first year and taken a year out due to mental health problems in her immediate family. However, not only did the earlier family health problems persist, but her husband lost his job leading to severe financial worries. These difficulties hampered her ability to concentrate on her studies. Added to this she experienced lack of confidence, having been out of education for some time (aged 53 at Access). In purely academic terms, her main difficulty lay in grasping the mathematics required for the study of psychology, and she progressed to second year carrying a class over. In second year she found the resulting study of four subjects in the face of family stresses 'a bit of a problem' and failed two of her four exams.

Perceived Need for Change: After first year wanted to be more systematic in preparation and to do more reading in advance to avoid 'cramming'. Appeared to have put this into practice when interviewed

following second year, as she described 'tailoring down' materials, sifting through past papers looking for pointers to the future, and focusing on four to six areas which she would also use as a basis for essay topics.

Help with Preparation: Rated help provided in both first and second years as 'very effective'. Found tutorials useful and lecturers and tutors helpful in providing tips on approaching exams and ideas on the key points to grasp. Found staff approachable, saying that most were available to turn to in the event of difficulties.

Outcome: Passed both resits and continued to third year. Remained undergraduate at final stage of research. Intends to graduate with ordinary degree.

(78) An MA student, who failed one exam (half course in German Language) in second year

Problems Experienced: Found it difficult to cover required German coursework. Had started German from scratch but course progressed on the assumption that students were already versed in German to some level. Had some financial worries and had worked part time throughout the academic year.

Preparation: Worked with past papers, selecting particular areas and topics. Discussed material with other students, particularly other Access students.

Perceived Need for Change: Would work towards examination preparation throughout the year.

Help with Preparation: One subject had given extra tutorials to help with examination preparation and revision but student found this very ineffective.

Outcome: Dropped German to study for single honours in Politics. Made this decision prior to learning of exam failure in view of workload considerations. Lost contact with the research prior to graduation.

(91) A BA student, who failed one subject in second year

Problems Experienced: Had experienced some problems with 'self-discipline' and fitting in work with his family commitments.

Preparation: Revised past papers.

Perceived Need for Change: None.

Help with Preparation: Lecturers had highlighted areas that would be examined. Had found this help effective.

Outcome: Unknown: lost contact with the research after interview regarding second year.

Appendix 5 – Chart 1

Interviews regarding academic experience

Humanities Students

Ref code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
01		•	•	•	
02		•	•	•	
05		•	•	■	•
08		•	•	■	•
18		•	•	5	
20		•	•	•	■
21		•	•	■	■
28		•	•	5	
29		•	•	•	■
31		•	•	■	■
35		•	•	•	
39		•	•	■	■
40		•	•	■	■
44		•	•	■	
45		•	•	•	■
56		•	•	•	■
66		•	5	5	■
68		•	•		
69		•	•	•	■
72		•	•	•	■
73		•	•	•	
75	•	•		■	■
78		•	5		
83			•	■	
87		•	•	5	■
89		•	5	■	■
90		•	•	•	■
Males					
30		•	•	•	
43		•		■	■
48		•	5	5	
49		•	•	5	■
70	•	5			
91		•		■	■

Science Students

Ref code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
09			•	■	■
12		•	•	■	
14			•	•	■
50	•	5			
71		•	5	■	
80*			•	5	
Males					
10			•	5	5
15**			•	•	•
22			•	■	■
23			•	•	■
37			5	•	
58			•	•	•
62			•	•	
63			•	5	■
64***			•	•	•
85			•	■	■

Key

SCHEDULED INTERVIEW STAGES

• In Higher Education: Interview Completed

5 In Higher Education: Not Interviewed

OUTWITH SCHEDULED INTERVIEW STAGES

□ In Higher Education

■ Not in Higher Education

▨ Not known if in Higher Education

* Interview re 1st stage of degree course on block release (her 3rd year of HE, having completed HNC over 2 years on day release)

** Interview 1 advanced diploma
Interview 2 MSc
Interview 3 MSc dissertation (part-time)

*** 5 year Hons course, 4th year on placement

NOTE: Interviews were attempted on three occasions, so most students have a combined total of three • and 5 entries. However, some have fewer, either as a result of having time out from education or having completed or dropped out of higher education at one or more of the interview stages.

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Appendix 5 – Chart 2

Financial problems

Humanities Students

Ref. Code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
FH01		5	5	5	
FH02		5	3	3	
FH05		5	5		3
FH08		5	5		3
FH18		5	5		
FH20		5	3	5	
FH21		5	5		
FH28		3	5		
FH29		5	3	5	
FH31		5	5		
FH35		5	5	5	
FH39		3	3		
FH40		3	5		
FH44		5	3		
FH45		5	3	5	
FH56		5	5	5	
FH66		3			
FH68		3	5		
FH69		3	3	5	
FH72		5	5	5	
FH73		5	5	5	
FH75	3	3			
FH78		3			
FH83			3		
FH87		5	5		
FH89		5			
FH90		3	5	5	
Males					
MH30		3	3	3	
MH43		3			
MH48		3			
MH49		5	5		
MH70	3				
MH91		5			

Science Students

Ref. Code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
FS09			5		
FS12		5	3		
FS14			5	3	
FS50	3				
FS71		5			
FS80			3		
Males					
MS10			5		
MS15			3	3	3
MS22			5		
MS23			5	5	
MS37				5	
MS58			3	3	3
MS62			5	5	
MS63			3		
MS64		3	3	3	
MS85			3		

Key

3 Financial problems
5 No financial problems

Appendix 5 – Chart 3

Students' evaluations of their studying in previous years

Humanities Students

Ref Code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
FH01		a	a	a	
FH02		c	b	b	
FH05		a	a		b
FH08		b	b		d
FH18		b	b		
FH20		a	c	a	
FH21		d	a		
FH28		b	a		
FH29		c	c	b	
FH31		a	c		
FH35		c	a	a	
FH39		b	b		
FH40		c	a		
FH44		b	a		
FH45		b	c	a	
FH56		b	d	b	
FH66		a			
FH68		c	b		
FH69		c	b	b	
FH72		a	a	a	
FH73		b	b	a	
FH75	c	b			
FH78		c			
FH83			a		
FH87		b	a		
FH89		c			
FH90		b	c	b	
Males					
MH30		a	d	b	
MH43		a			
MH48		b			
MH49		c	c		
MH70	b				
MH91		b			

Science Students

Ref Code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
FS09			a		
FS12		c	b		
FS14			d	a	
FS50	a				
FS71		a			
FS80			d		
Males					
MS10			a		
MS15			a	a	a
MS22			b		
MS23			a	d	
MS37				a	
MS58			b	a	b
MS62			c	b	
MS63			b		
MS64			a	a	a
MS85			b		

Key

a coped well
b had a few probs. managed in general
c found some subjects particularly difficult
d found the whole course difficult

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Appendix 5 – Chart 4

Academic problems experienced

Humanities students

Students

Ref Code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
FH01		x	a	a	
FH02		b,c	a,c	c	
FH05		x	x		b
FH08		d	a		b
FH18		a	a		
FH20		x	a,b	x	
FH21		b,c	a		
FH28		a,c	x		
FH29		b	b	d	
FH31		a	b		
FH35		a	x	x	
FH39		a,d	a		
FH40		b,d	x		
FH44		a	x		
FH45		c	a,c	x	
FH56		c	b,c	x	
FH66		x			
FH68		a,b	a		
FH69		c	a	a	
FH72		c	a	x	
FH73		a	a,c	x	
FH75	a,b	a,b			
FH78		a,b,c			
FH83			d		
FH87		c	c		
FH89		b,c			
FH90		a	b,d	c	
Males					
MH30		x	d	d	
MH43		x			
MH48		b			
MH49		b	b		
MH70	b				
MH91		a			

Science

Ref Code	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	Post-grad
Females					
FS09			a		
FS12		c	b		
FS14			b	x	
FS50	b				
FS71		a			
FS80			b,c,d		
Males					
MS10			x		
MS15			x	d	x
MS22			c		
MS23			a	b	
MS37				x	
MS58			b	a	b
MS62			a,b,d	a,b	
MS63			b,c		
MS64			c	x	x
MS85			b		

Key

a	influence of personal circ'stances, incl. health
b	intrinsic to course work/exams
c	institutional re lecturers, tutorials, structure
d	other
x	none

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